CENTRAL AVENUE SOUNDS:

Gerald Wiggins

Interviewed by Steven L. Isoardi

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California
Los Angeles

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BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: May 12, 1922, New York City.

Education: High School of Music and Arts, New York City.

Military Service: United States Army, 1944-46.

Spouse: I'Lee Patria; Lynn Charney, 2 children.

CAREER HISTORY:

Gerald Wiggins Trio, with bassists Joe Comfort, Red Callender, Charlie Drayton, and drummers William Douglass, Lee Young.

Gerald Wiggins Duo, with bassists Red Callender, Andy Simpkins.

Toured, appeared, and recorded as a pianist with:

Louis Armstrong

Ernie Andrews

Louis Bellson

Rusty Bryant

Red Callender

Cab Calloway

Benny Carter

Kenny Clarke

Nat King Cole

Buddy Collette

Curtis Counce

Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis

George Duvivier

Harry "Sweets" Edison

Teddy Edwards

Roy Eldridge

Duke Ellington

Marla Gibbs

Dizzy Gillespie

Wardell Gray

Helen Grayco

Bill Henderson

Major Holley

Red Holloway

Linda Hopkins

Lena Horne

Helen Humes

Milt Jackson

Oliver Jackson

J. J. Johnson

Plas Johnson

Jo Jones

Barney Kessell

Eartha Kitt

Harold Land

Frank Morgan

Ruth Olay

Joe Pass

King Pleasure

Art Pepper

"Little Esther" Phillips

Ruth Price

Annie Ross

Zoot Sims

Kay Starr

Maxine Sullivan

Buddy Tate

Clark Terry

Ed Thigpen

Cal Tjader

Danny Turner

Joe Turner

Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson

Dinah Washington

Joe Williams

Gerald Wilson

Jimmy Witherspoon

Chris Woods

Eugene Wright

SELECTED RECORDINGS:

Wiggin' with Wig, Dig Records, ca. 1955.

Reminiscin' with Wig, Motif Records, ca. 1955.

Around the World in 80 Days, Contemporary Records, 1957.

The King and I, Challenge Records, 1957.

Wiggin' Out, Hifire Records, 1960.

Relax and Enjoy It, Contemporary Records, 1962.

Wig is Here, Black and Blue, 1974.

A Beautiful Friendship, Black and Blue, 1977.

Night Mist Blues, Hemisphere, 1983.

Radio City, Concord, 1990.

Race Point, Concord, 1990.

Groovin' High, Concord, 1992.

SELECTED FILM SCORES PLAYED ON:

Consenting Adults

Don't Look Back

Harlem Nights

King Creole

Lady Sings the Blues

Latin One

Les Girls

Let's Make Love (composed jazz tunes)

No Business Like Show Business

Send Me No Flowers

Strip City

The View From Pompey's Head

White Men Can't Jump

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Steven L. Isoardi, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program; B.A., Government, University of San Francisco; M.A., Government, University of San Francisco; M.A., Political Science, UCLA; Ph.D., Political Science, UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Wiggins's home, Woodland Hills, California.

Dates, length of sessions: January 8, 1990 (75 minutes); February 6, 1990 (72); February 13, 1990 (66).

Total number of recorded hours: 3.50

Persons present during interview: Wiggins, Lynn Charney Wiggins, and Isoardi.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one of a series designed to preserve the spoken memories of individuals, primarily musicians, who were raised near and/or performed on Los Angeles's Central Avenue, especially from the late 1920s to the mid-1950s. Musician and teacher William Green, his student Steven Isoardi, and early project interviewee Buddy Collette provided major inspiration for the UCLA Oral History Program's inaugurating the Central Avenue Sounds Oral History Project.

In preparing for the interview, Isoardi consulted jazz histories, autobiographies, oral histories, relevant jazz periodicals, documentary films, and back issues of the California Eagle and the Los Angeles Sentinel.

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Wiggins's childhood and education in New York City and continuing on through his move to Los Angeles and his career as a jazz musician. Major topics include fellow musicians, musical styles, and the rise and fall of Central Avenue.

EDITING:

Alex Cline, editor, edited the interview. He checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the

original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Wherever possible, the proper names of nightclubs were checked against articles and advertisements in back issues of the California Eagle. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Wiggins reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made some corrections and additions.

Cline also prepared the biographical summary. Steven J. Novak, editor, prepared the table of contents, interview history, and index.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

JANUARY 8, 1990

ISOARDI: Gerry, let's begin with where you were born, what the environment was like, your early musical influences, how you got interested in music, things like that.

WIGGINS: Okay, here we go. I was born in New York City on May 12, 1922. I went to all the schools, PS [Public School] 68, PS 24, Frederick Douglass Junior High School, which is PS 139, and the High School of Music and Arts, which [Fiorella] La Guardia started.

ISOARDI: Is that the performing arts high school in New York now?

WIGGINS: No, it was-- That's where it is now, I think, but at that time it was the High School of Music and Arts.

ISOARDI: How did you end up there?

WIGGINS: My English teacher [Amanda Kemp] in junior high school suggested that I go there. I wanted to go to Townsend Harris, which was an elite school in New York, but you had to be almost a brain to go there. And she advised me that I did not have the brains to go there. [laughter] She said, "They started this new school up on Convent Avenue. It's for musicians, and that's where you should be." So I took her advice and got in. Only, they had so many piano players that I had to take another instrument, and I chose bass violin. Why? I don't know.

But I did.

ISOARDI: Had you ever played it before?

WIGGINS: No.

ISOARDI: Did they have an audition or something?

WIGGINS: No. It didn't make any difference. You had to choose another instrument, because everybody that went there played piano. Most of the students were piano players, and they had to form a symphony orchestra. So I took up bass violin, and, surprisingly enough, I became very good at it. In fact, I was the first-chair bass player. [laughter]

ISOARDI: But your love was piano, after all?

WIGGINS: Yeah, but it didn't matter. There were piano players so good up there [that] it was a shame.

ISOARDI: Really?

WIGGINS: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: Any names you remember from then who we might know now?

WIGGINS: Well, not-- I remember most of the guys-- Like Shorty Rogers, he came after me. Shorty Rogers went to Music and Arts. There was a young man, Sid Garris, a little ahead of me. He was one terrific violinist. I think he came out here and became a president of MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer] or something. And Brock Peters also went there. It was a different name, and I won't tell you

that name, because I don't think he wants to remember it at all. [laughter] But, let's see. Anyhow, it was quite a school, and most of the kids who went there did very well for themselves.

ISOARDI: Really? Musically, you mean?

WIGGINS: Musically, yeah.

ISOARDI: When did you start playing?

WIGGINS: When did I start playing? Well, my mother [Eleanor Foster Wiggins] had me taking lessons when I was four years old, which, you know, that was ridiculous. But that's what she wanted. I remember my first teacher was a lady by the name of Margaret Murray. She brought me along till I got pretty good. And I went to a gentleman by the name of Carl Diton, and that was a struggle, because, at that time, Mr. Diton's favorite pupil was-- How can I forget? Now I've got to wait till it comes back to me.

ISOARDI: Well, we'll get it in later.

WIGGINS: Yeah, and he used to-- Calvin Jackson. That was his star pupil. Anytime I'd go to take a lesson, he would tell me how Calvin did. [laughter] You know, I loved him for that.

ISOARDI: Calvin Jackson was older than you were, then? Or were you guys about the same age?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. He was older than I was. Yeah.

ISOARDI: Much older than you?

WIGGINS: And Mr. Diton stayed with me, you know. He let me make a fool of myself. I learned quite a bit from him. But it was all classical music, you know.

ISOARDI: Strictly classical, your training?

WIGGINS: All classical, yeah. And this went on it seemed like for years until I found out I couldn't make a living in New York playing classical music. There just was no place for us at that time. So I got into jazz. While I was at Music and Arts, Benny Goodman used to come up with Teddy Wilson and Gene Krupa, and they'd play little concerts for us.

ISOARDI: They came up to the school and played?

WIGGINS: Up to the school, yeah. The gymnasium was packed whenever they came, you know. You almost had to know somebody to get in.

ISOARDI: I'll bet.

WIGGINS: At that time, Teddy Wilson was my favorite piano player. I said he was the greatest thing that ever happened, until I heard Art Tatum. [laughter] That changed everything. And I got to meet Art, and Art got me my first job. He got me a job with Stepin Fetchit [Lincoln Perry], of all people. I went on the road with Stepin Fetchit one summer. I was about seventeen years old.

ISOARDI: Good beginning, though.

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, you know, I thought I was hot stuff,

but I really didn't know anything. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, that's not bad for a seventeen-year-old.

WIGGINS: Well, yeah, but, you know, it was like background music. And I'd help him with his act a little bit, you know. He'd do little funny things.

ISOARDI: When you were a kid and you had this straight, classical training, were you listening to jazz on the side? I mean, when you were away from your teacher--

WIGGINS: I was listening to it, but not thinking of getting into it.

ISOARDI: Really? You never played it on your own time?

WIGGINS: Well, this came a little bit later on when I found out, if you played the parties, the little girls would flock around you. That's when I started to take an interest in piano. [laughter] And before, I really couldn't care less.

ISOARDI: They didn't want to hear Chopin or--?

WIGGINS: The guys were out in the street playing stick-ball, and I was upstairs practicing. It used to gripe me. And I practiced. Mom got me up a half hour before I had breakfast, and I'd go to school. When I got home for lunch, another half hour. And then, when I got home, three or four more hours.

ISOARDI: That much playing?

WIGGINS: Yeah. I was practicing, and she made sure that I

did it.

ISOARDI: Wow.

WIGGINS: Now I wish I had worked harder at it, but you never know where you're going.

ISOARDI: That was pretty hard for a young kid. That's four hours a day. Wow.

WIGGINS: Yeah, while all the kids are outside playing, too. Yeah. Actually, I wish I'd have done eight hours a day, because that's what it takes to really become a good musician. But it worked out pretty well. I got lucky, and I learned a few things.

ISOARDI: Was there anybody else in your family who played music? Or was this just sort of your mother thinking that you really should master this?

WIGGINS: Well, all my people were church people, and my mother played piano. So I naturally had to play piano at church, too. And I had a cousin that was a whiz on the violin. His name was Romaine Brown. He died a few years ago. He was the top violinist at Music and Arts. We both went to Music and Arts. But he ran into the same problem; he couldn't make a living playing classics. And so, next thing I knew, he was playing piano. But he sang and did a- - He was more of an entertainer than a real piano player. He died a few years ago. But he was one hell of a violinist. He was in a group they had in New York at the

time called the New Friends of Music. This was a classical group. They got a lot of acclaim.

ISOARDI: So your first real music experiences, probably, were in church, then?

WIGGINS: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: The first time you really heard music, yeah.

WIGGINS: Well, you know, I learned how to play the hymns, and my mother and my aunt were pretty good ladies. They used to have church sessions at home like two or three times a week, and I had to play for those. To me it was mature, you know. When you're a kid you have to do what the grown-ups say.

ISOARDI: Yeah. No kidding. When did you realize you wouldn't have a chance of making it in the classical world?

WIGGINS: Oh, I used to listen to like people like Paderewski, who was a fantastic pianist. I think he was the president of Poland at that time. I went to a few of his concerts, and that old man was strong. He could break a note with a little finger. He was unbelievable. And I guess I just didn't want it bad enough. For one thing, in classical music, everybody plays the same notes. There's no variation, and so you have to get by on touch and interpretation and shading and all that.

ISOARDI: Miles Davis--

WIGGINS: Yeah?

ISOARDI: I just read his autobiography [Miles, the Autobiography], and he called it robot music.

WIGGINS: That's what it is. You know, everybody's got the same thing going in. There's no room for improvisation. You play what's written, and it gets pretty boring, you know.

ISOARDI: It's like slipping into a warm bath, with nothing to disturb you.

WIGGINS: Yeah, it was pretty dull. So, as I say, when I found out the girls would crowd around you at the parties, I started getting into playing jazz. I had my favorite bands, like Jimmie Lunceford's was my favorite band. I didn't know too much about Duke [Ellington] at that time. I guess that was a little too far advanced for me. I could understand Lunceford and [Count] Basie, though.

ISOARDI: Really? Did you see them when they--?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. They used to play at a place called the--

ISOARDI: The Savoy?

WIGGINS: No, the Renaissance Ballroom.

ISOARDI: Where was the Renaissance?

WIGGINS: Right on about Seventh Avenue in New York. Seventh Avenue and 137th Street or something like that. I've forgotten the exact address. But when I knew Lunceford was going to be in town, I'd get my tickets

early, you know. It was like a big party. We'd get there early and have a big basket of food and stake out our little booths and stay there till it was all over. And it was always packed in there. You had to get your tickets early or else you didn't get in. I loved the Lunceford band. Later on, I got to meet the guys like Snooky Young and Gerald Wilson. They were in that band. That was really exciting when I finally got to play with them, you know. At that time I was still in high school, and they were big stars for me.

ISOARDI: When did you start appreciating Ellington? Did that come a little bit later? How much later?

WIGGINS: Oh, much, much later. I just didn't have enough knowledge to really know what he was doing. I liked what they did, but he didn't swing like Basie, and he didn't do the things that Lunceford did, you know. So after I really started listening to music and finding out what really makes it tick, I became a big fan, because Duke was-- He was amazing. I found out later that-- You know, everybody was trying to find out how he got all these different blends and colors of sound, and I found out that, if a guy was missing, like a trombone player wasn't there, he'd give the part to a tenor player, you know, whatever. And it worked. You know, he was never at a loss for anything. He'd come up with the darndest ideas. Plus, he had some

great soloists. At that time, my favorite saxophone player was Benny Carter. I never did think too much of Johnny Hodges until I found out what Johnny was doing. And I said, "Oh, that's what it's all about." Well, I used to think he was more like Guy Lombardo, that syrupy-- Benny played the kind of saxophone I liked at that time. I still do. I think he is still the greatest. But Benny's great in any situation, where Hodges had to be with the Ellington thing to really be appreciated.

ISOARDI: Did you ever see Chick Webb? I mean, if you liked those hard-swinging bands--

WIGGINS: Yeah, I caught Chick Webb a couple of times at the Savoy Ballroom. I'd sneak in. I caught him at the Apollo [Theatre], too, several times.

ISOARDI: But he didn't impress you as much as the Lunceford band, or Basie?

WIGGINS: No, it was a-- You see, there were so many bands in New York at that time. God, there were hundreds of bands. You know, Lucky Millander-- Bands you probably never even heard of. Erskine Hawkins-- I used to be able to rattle them all off. I can't even remember now.

ISOARDI: Plus all the touring bands, I guess, from the Midwest and everywhere.

WIGGINS: Yeah. Cab Calloway had a band. Fletcher Henderson had a band. Horace Henderson had a band. You

know, you could go to the Apollo every week and hear a different band, which was great. Some you liked, and some you didn't like. But the Apollo was really where I really got a musical education, because they had the best of bands there. They had the best of everything: the bands, comedians, acts. I remember a dance team called the Miller Brothers and Lois, three guys and a gal. They could dance up a storm. I don't know what happened to them, but they were fantastic. Then you had guys like Baby Laurence, Walter Green, Honi Coles. I ran into them when I was working at a joint called Monroe's Uptown House.

ISOARDI: When were you working there?

WIGGINS: Oh, that was my high school days.

ISOARDI: Mid-thirties? Late thirties?

WIGGINS: Oh, no, no. Later than that. It had to be--

ISOARDI: 'Thirty-nine, '40?

WIGGINS: 'Thirty-nine, '40, something like that, yeah. I graduated from high school in '40. So I'm not exactly a kid, you know. [laughter]

ISOARDI: According to Lee Young you are! [laughter]

WIGGINS: Lee just had to say that. [laughter] Yeah. Anyhow, I used to go to work at eleven thirty at night at Monroe's and get off at about six in the morning and go straight from there to high school, which was right up the hill from the place.

ISOARDI: Wow.

WIGGINS: And I'd forgotten. I met my high school teacher out here, my English teacher, and she says, "Yeah, you used to sleep in all my classes." [laughter] But she's a real big jazz fan, too. I remember she told me one time, she said, "Who's your favorite piano player?" I said, "I want to play like Teddy Wilson." And she says, "Well, you're not going to make it the way you're going." [laughter] Oh, I was crushed.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Yeah. When you were in high school at the Music and Arts School, were you playing? Did you have groups? Were you and some of your classmates organizing bands? Were you guys playing?

WIGGINS: Oh, no, no.

ISOARDI: Nothing like that?

WIGGINS: No. I had contacts in the real world, you know. So I played-- There was a guy who had a band. They called him Young Count. He'd put a little band together, and I used to sub for him at times. There was a guy by the name of Eddie Bonnemere, a piano player. I knew him. There was a lot of action in Harlem at that time, and I did most of my work in Harlem and down in Greenwich Village.

ISOARDI: So almost as soon as you were playing jazz in high school, you were out doing it professionally.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: Wow. And you were playing at Monroe's around '39, '40. I guess you must have been around, then, when bebop was just starting.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah, sure. Diz [Dizzy Gillespie] and I used to hang out quite a bit.

ISOARDI: Really? At Monroe's? What was that like? I mean, tell me more about Monroe's and what it was like there.

WIGGINS: Monroe's Uptown House was a nightclub. After-hours it ran. See, New York hours, at that time, you went to work at eight and got off at four o'clock in the morning. And just one group, you know. It was no two bands in those days.

ISOARDI: So you were part of the house band, then, at Monroe's.

WIGGINS: Yeah, I was in the house band there. But we went to work at eleven thirty and got off at daylight, whichever came first. If the joint emptied out, then we got off early. [laughter]

ISOARDI: But if it emptied out too much, then you wouldn't have a job. [laughter]

WIGGINS: That would mean the joint was busted. [laughter] Yeah, there were some good guys in that band. Let's see. George Treadwell, who was, I think, Sarah Vaughan's first husband. Let's see, who else? I think it

was Mickey something, a good drummer, and Ebenezer Paul, a bass player. Well, you know, there was a lot of change in the personnel. Some of the guys made names for themselves, and others just dropped out of music. Lucky for me, I stayed with it, because mostly all the kids I grew up in the neighborhood, they're either dead now or in jail. Which is a shame, but-- And we had a little club. Each block in Harlem at that time had a club. You know, a little gang. They were called clubs then; they're gangs now. Our club was the Victors, and our big thing was playing other blocks stickball every Sunday. That was a big thing. We each put up a dollar, and the winner would get all the money. That's the only chance I got to play stickball, because the rest of the time I was practicing. I was horrible at it. I couldn't hit the ball, couldn't field, couldn't do anything. [laughter]

And then, finally, I played with Step for about a couple of summers. No, just that one summer. And I came back and-- I'm trying to think now. Oh, yeah. Well, that's how I happened to come out here. That was right after I got out of high school in 1940, and we were working at the Brooklyn Strand. The house band was Les Hite's band from Los Angeles. The army took his piano player, and the police took Stepin Fetchit off the stage for some charge. So Les said to me, "Well, you don't have a boss and I don't

have a piano player. How would you like to go to California?" I jumped at the chance.

ISOARDI: How old were you then? Was that by eighteen, nineteen?

WIGGINS: Eighteen, yeah.

ISOARDI: Eighteen.

WIGGINS: I got out here like Christmas Day, and it was a hundred degrees, and I loved it. [laughter] I said, "This can't be happening," because I knew what was going on in New York. I called my mother. I said, "I have found god's country. This weather is not to be believed. I don't think I'm ever coming back to New York." I did go back, but California was it for me. That sunshine really sold me. And I've never regretted it. I remember Jo Jones used to say, "Wig, come on back to New York. I can make you rich." And every time I saw him later, he said, "You see, if you'd have stayed with me and stayed in New York, you'd be doing--" Who was the piano player? [Joe Bushkin] He was New York's idol for a while. You know. Oh, what's his name? He's still around, I think. He got all the society jobs and everything through Jo's influence. It will come to me sooner or later. You know him. He's a well-known piano player. Anyhow, Jo used to throw it in my face all the time. Until the day he died, he told me what I should have done. I should have never left New York. I told him

it was too cold. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Who was in that Les Hite Band that you joined? Do you remember some of the guys?

WIGGINS: Floyd Turner was in it. A wonderful drummer, Oscar Bradley.

ISOARDI: Was Lloyd Reese playing with them then?

WIGGINS: Oh, no. I met Lloyd Reese. We became good friends, too, when I first came out here. But this is one of the later bands he had. In fact, that was his first trip to New York, I think. Oh, here's something funny. A friend of mine had a whole-- Or did you have that picture of them, of the Les Hite Band?

ISOARDI: No, it wasn't me.

WIGGINS: Who had that picture? Anyhow, let's see who else was in it. Benny Booker was the bass player, Frank Pasley was the guitarist, Walter Williams was one of the trumpet players, and Coney Woodman was the piano player who I replaced. I think Britt Woodman and his brother [William Woodman] were in the band, a tenor player by the name of Roger Hurd-- I've forgotten. I'll probably-- Let's see. I'm going to make a note.

ISOARDI: Let me take you back just for a minute, before we get further into the West Coast thing, and talk a bit more about the scene around 1940 at Monroe's and Minton's. Were they jamming much?

WIGGINS: We used to go to Minton's and jam all the time.

ISOARDI: Was that after you'd finish at Monroe's with Leonard?

WIGGINS: Yeah. Well, no, it wasn't after Monroe's when we-- This is when I was working in the Village. I got off and I was working at the Rendezvous, I think, Swing Rendezvous, or something, and the Black Cat. We'd get off at four o'clock, and then everybody would come up and go to Minton's then.

ISOARDI: Do you remember your first reaction when you heard some of the stuff that people would later call bebop? I mean, after going from Benny Goodman and Count Basie and Jimmie Lunceford, and then there are these new sounds coming out.

WIGGINS: Well, since I was right in the middle of it, it didn't bother me that much. You know, I knew Dizzy was trying to do something. He utterly ruined the two trumpet players at Monroe's. They were playing cornet at the time because Dizzy had a cornet.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? He was playing cornet?

WIGGINS: Yeah, yeah. So they had these cornets, and they were making these terrible noises through them and trying to play flat fives and didn't know what they were. Dizzy didn't either, but he made sense with his, because, you know, he started it. But these poor guys, they were

trying-- This was George Treadwell and Victor Coulson, I remember. They were the two trumpet players we had. Dizzy drove them crazy. They were out of their minds. Oh, and incidentally, Dizzy joined Les Hite's band, too, while I was with the band.

ISOARDI: Really? While you were in New York?

WIGGINS: Yeah. And that was funny.

ISOARDI: How did Les Hite handle Dizzy Gillespie?

WIGGINS: He didn't handle Dizzy Gillespie. [laughter]

ISOARDI: He must have wondered what those sounds were.

WIGGINS: Well, no, it wasn't that. You know, Dizzy wasn't a clown, but, you know, he was mischievous. And Les was kind of portly. Did you ever see a picture of him?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

WIGGINS: Yeah. Well, he would dance in front of the band, and Diz would be back in the trumpet section doing the same thing he was doing. When Les turned around, he'd sit down. [laughter] So Les went crazy. Dizzy will verify this. He didn't know what to do with Dizzy, because Dizzy had had that incident with Cab Calloway, and that had Les a little unnerved. So he fired the whole band to get rid of Diz.

ISOARDI: You're kidding!

WIGGINS: And after he got rid of Dizzy, he hired us all back without Diz. [laughter] That was his solution to

getting rid of Dizzy. And Dizzy still remembers it. He says, "Hey, Wig, do you remember Les firing everybody so he could get rid of me?" I said, "I remember." [laughter] That was funny. Dizzy had Les Hite going out of his mind. Well, Diz, see, he was just a big kidder. He wasn't malicious or anything. He just-- Les looked funny to him down there, waving his stick and shaking his hips, so Diz would be back there doing the same thing. [laughter] Les would turn around and he'd be-- [laughter] The games they played on each other.

ISOARDI: Yeah. You must have--maybe for a little while, anyway--encountered Charlie Christian, though.

WIGGINS: No, I never met Charlie Christian.

ISOARDI: Never met him? Never saw him at any of those places jamming or anything?

WIGGINS: I probably saw him, but I wasn't into guitar players, anyhow, so it didn't matter. You know, I was strictly for piano players, and there was a million of them in New York. I mean, great guys: Sonny White, Herman Chittison, Tatum, Teddy Wilson, [Dorothy] Donegan. If you thought you could play piano, come to New York and you'd find out how little you knew, you know.

ISOARDI: Wow.

WIGGINS: And then, we used to go to an after-hours place called Ruben's. Ruben's was like a speakeasy, you know,

one floor down on 132d, 133d Street. You'd get there, and all the piano players in town would be there. It was just one room with an upright piano in it. You'd open the door and hit the piano. And all the guys, the piano players, would sit down there and play until Tatum walked in. When he walked in, they scattered. [laughter] Yeah, and they left the piano there for him.

And Art-- Ruben always kept a case of quarts of Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer.

ISOARDI: See, everybody whom I've heard talk about Tatum mentions Pabst Blue Ribbon.

WIGGINS: That's what he drank.

ISOARDI: Just that.

WIGGINS: He would open a bottle and put it up on top of the piano. He'd reach up there and get it, take a swig, and all hell would break loose when he started playing. The guys would just sit there with envy, you know. "How did he do it?" He was fabulous. He was unbelievable. That's when I-- You know, I didn't give up on Teddy Wilson, but I knew Teddy would never be the piano player that Tatum was, or nobody else, as far as I could see.

ISOARDI: Was that the first time you saw Tatum, was at Ruben's?

WIGGINS: Yeah. A cousin of mine bought me a couple of records. He bought me "Elegy" and "Humoresque" and a

couple other 78s. I thought it was two guys playing the piano. I couldn't believe one man could do this. You know, it was just impossible. Nobody was doing that. Finally, I got in with the crowd that used to go to Ruben's. I went by and I met Tatum and I was in hog heaven, believe me. I just sat there. And the way he did it-- Effortlessly, you know. No mistakes, clean runs, speed to throw away. He could play as fast as I could pat my foot. It was amazing. And the time was right there. I don't care where he went, you know, he'd go out of the tune, but he always was within the framework of the tune. And if you sang the melody, he was right there all the way. He was an amazing man.

But all he wanted to talk about was baseball. He'd tell you what Ty Cobb hit in 1903 and--

ISOARDI: Really?

WIGGINS: Yeah. Oh, he was-- Anything he wanted to do, he could have done. He had a brilliant mind. And he loved sports. We used to play pinochle together. He'd hold the cards up like this. [indicates]

ISOARDI: But he could see enough out of that one eye to make out the cards?

WIGGINS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But he was a guy you had to really know, because he was a bunch of laughs. You know, he was good-humored and just a sweetheart. He used to call

me "Gearl." He'd say, "Gearl." I'd say, "Well, how did you do that?" "Well, Gearl, it's like this." Whoosh! And I'd say, "Thanks." [laughter] And the greatest thing of all, if I was playing somewhere, he'd come to hear me play.

ISOARDI: Would he really?

WIGGINS: Yeah, and that really was a good feeling.

ISOARDI: I've heard stories that people like [Artur] Rubinstein and [Vladimir] Horowitz--

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah, they'd fly!

ISOARDI: They would sneak into clubs to see this guy.

WIGGINS: Well, Rubinstein, if he was within five hundred miles, he'd fly there to go hear Tatum. Oh, he loved him. I know you never got to see him in person.

ISOARDI: No.

WIGGINS: No. Well, he was amazing. He was an amazing man.

ISOARDI: I've seen film clips of him playing.

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And a friend of mine who plays piano--his interest has been mostly classical--I told him to watch this one program on Channel 28 [KCET, Community Television of Southern California] or something on jazz, and they had a clip of Tatum playing in there. And the next day, he said, "Who was Art Tatum?"

WIGGINS: You mean, he didn't know about Tatum?

ISOARDI: No. This guy really doesn't like jazz that much. His interest is really classical, and he likes to play classical. He didn't know anything. He didn't know anything about that.

WIGGINS: Mmm-mmm-mmm.

ISOARDI: I know. It's too bad. I keep telling him he's deprived, culturally deprived.

WIGGINS: Well, really, because Tatum could play classical like you wouldn't believe. He studied at the Toledo institute [Toledo School of Music], you know.

ISOARDI: When this friend of mine saw that clip of Tatum playing, he was just knocked out. He said he couldn't believe this guy's hands. He couldn't get over the fact, too, that the guy was just about blind.

WIGGINS: Yeah. Well, he wasn't blind all-- He lost his sight as a young man, you know, because he accompanied Adelaide Hall for a while, and he had to read her music. For his classical background, he had to study. He didn't pick all that up by ear, believe me.

ISOARDI: I can't remember whether I heard or read a funny story about Tatum, about him playing, I think, in L.A. somewhere. A couple from San Francisco was in town, and they were with somebody that he knew at the table listening. And at intermission, he came up and they were introduced. And they were somewhat snobs, right, classical

snobs. So the woman sort of jokingly says, "Well, do you like Bach?" Or "Do you know Bach?"

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah, I know this one. That's true, yeah. He sat down and played classical.

ISOARDI: He said, "Oh, I know a little." He sat down for an hour and a half and played Bach from memory! [laughter]

WIGGINS: Yeah, he was truly amazing. Do you mind if I smoke?

ISOARDI: Oh, no. Go ahead. Of course not. In fact, I smoke cigars.

WIGGINS: Oh, I used to smoke them too. They got to be too expensive.

ISOARDI: Would you like one? I've got some.

WIGGINS: Oh, no, no. I gave those up years ago. Yeah, we had started off with a little trio I had with Bill [William] Douglass and-- Who was it was in that trio? Joe Comfort. We got on the cigar kick. Why, I don't know. We were working on Central Avenue at a place called the Turban Room. So we decided, big shots with these cigars, we'd get the five-cent, ten-cent cigars, the crooks. And then finally we got to twenty-five cents and fifty-cents and a dollar and a dollar fifty.

ISOARDI: A dollar fifty in those days was--

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. Listen, I saw my money going down the drain, and I wasn't enjoying that much. I said, "Hey, this

has got to stop." Well, you know, everybody, all the big shots, had these huge cigars, you know, so we wanted to be big shots.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Well, back then those were probably Havanas.

WIGGINS: Whatever they were, I never did find out what a good cigar was, because, with me, it was just a thing, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So Tatum was a real powerful influence on you.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. Well, he's been an influence on all piano players. You can't name one now, except if you've got-- Even [Thelonius] Monk tried to play like Tatum for a while. You know, he finally went on to his own thing, which everybody usually does, because you can't-- [laughter] It's hopeless, you know. All the piano players, even Dorothy Donegan, she will try to do a little Tatum. The closest to him, I think, was Marlowe Morris. That was Tatum's sidekick. Tatum showed him a lot of things, so he was close.

Oh, another guy that-- What's his name? [Johnny Guarnieri] He worked out here, too, in the [San Fernando] Valley, at McHenry's [Tail of the Cock], until he died. He was a great piano player. But his thing was sounding like everybody else. You name a piano player, he'd sound just

like him.

ISOARDI: You mean, he'd just sort of imitate.

WIGGINS: Yeah, he was-- That was his thing, you know.

ISOARDI: That would get frustrating after a while.

WIGGINS: Well, no. He was a good piano player. This guy was-- You know, he wasn't kidding around at all. He could play. He had his own thing, too, but he loved to sound like somebody else. He'd out-Garner [Erroll] Garner, out-Tatum Tatum, you know. He had the technique and everything. Lynn [Charney Wiggins] and I used to go by and catch him all the time. He died in the past couple of years, too. He was a good piano player. I thought I'd never forget his name. He was wonderful. Good piano player. And you know of him, too. I mean, he's not just, you know, some fly-by-night guy. He was--

ISOARDI: Well, you can write in it. You can write it in later. [laughter]

WIGGINS: Anyhow, we used to go down and catch him a couple of nights every week. He used to tell me, he'd say, "You know, Art Tatum, he could have been much greater than he was, but he wouldn't get his teeth fixed, and he wouldn't do this, he wouldn't do that, you know." But he still--

ISOARDI: You mean commercially more successful.

WIGGINS: Yeah, yeah. You know, Art was homespun.

ISOARDI: That's how he always sounded to me.

WIGGINS: Yeah. You know, the biggest thing he ever did for himself was buy a brand-new Steinway, and I think he died a few months later after that.

ISOARDI: Really?

WIGGINS: Yeah. That had been his ambition, to buy a Steinway. They should have given him one, you know, but he bought this new Steinway B. The morning before he died, all the piano players in town were at his house. We all played for him. He sat on the side of the bed while we played. The next morning, he was gone.

ISOARDI: Did you guys know the end was near when you--? Is that why you all got together? Did you know the end was near?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we knew that because I talked to Gerri [Tatum], his wife. He had something that-- Oh, what was that disease? Uremia?

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

WIGGINS: Yeah, I think that's what it was. And I was getting angry with her. I said, "Well, can't you call the doctor and do something?" She said, "Nothing can be done." Well, then, that's the way it went. I think every piano player in town was there. Carl Perkins, Eddie Beal, just everybody who was in town. We all played for him. And he didn't look like he was sick. He was sitting on the side of his bed nodding and smiling. And the next morning, I got

the word. They said, "Well, Wig, he's gone." I said, "Wow." You know. That kind of left a void, because I'd known him quite a few years, since 1940, I guess. Even before then. Yeah, a couple of years before. It was 1938 when I met him. He was so helpful to the guys. You could ask him anything, and he'd show it to you, and you didn't have a chance of doing it. [laughter] You know, even if he broke it down for you-- He was just unbelievable.

Why can't I remember this piano player's name? I used to go over there every week to see him.

ISOARDI: So that must have been one of the drawbacks, I guess, of coming out to California, then, is you were three thousand miles away from Tatum.

WIGGINS: Oh, he was out here, too.

ISOARDI: He'd come out about the same time you did?

WIGGINS: Yeah! I don't know when he got here, but we used to hang out together. Carl Perkins, Willie [Hawkins]-- What was Willie's name? Willie was a piano player who never had a lesson in his life. Played in F-sharp, and could play--

ISOARDI: He played everything in F-sharp?

WIGGINS: Everything in F-sharp.

ISOARDI: God, why F-sharp? [laughter] If you're going to pick a--

WIGGINS: No formal training, you know. That's the easiest key, really, because--

ISOARDI: Really?

WIGGINS: It's built on the pentatonic scale, that five-note scale, so you can find everything you'd want right there. You can bang it, all the black keys, and get some kind of a chord.

ISOARDI: That's true.

WIGGINS: Yeah. Willie Hawkins. That was his name. Tatum loved him. He had Tatum's style. And, boy, we used to hang out together.

ISOARDI: That's right. On the saxophone, when you play F-sharp, it's not the same as doing it on a piano.

WIGGINS: Well, that depends on whether-- If you're playing an alto, it's easy, because you're in-- But they don't like it. But alto, he's in E-flat. If you're in F-sharp, he's in E-flat. Now, if you're in A-natural, he's in F-sharp. He's got a problem, and so have you. [laughter] It's worse for the tenor player, because if you're in A-natural but he's in B-natural--

ISOARDI: Yeah, and not happy.

WIGGINS: I know. And like, if you're in F-sharp, he's in A-flat, and he doesn't like it a bit, either. Although, A-flat's an easy key for me. But, now, B-flat is his key, see. It's a B-flat instrument, so he has a ball with it.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So you came out with Les Hite, then. It was about 1940?

WIGGINS: I guess it was about that time.

ISOARDI: You were in Southern California.

WIGGINS: And I loved it. Then somehow I got mixed up with Louis Armstrong, and I went back East with his-- Back East with Louis.

ISOARDI: With his big band.

WIGGINS: Yeah, with the big band. That was good for me, because I met Joe Garland, who was like the straw boss of the band. He's the guy who wrote "In the Mood" and "Leap Frog." He kind of took me under his wing. He was trying to get me to write the solos I played so they could put it in Downbeat and all that. I didn't want to have any of that. You know, I wasn't even interested in writing anything.

ISOARDI: Not at all?

WIGGINS: No, no. I really didn't think anything about writing till I joined Benny Carter, which I left for Louis Armstrong. Two weeks out of New York, we had just done about fifty one-nighters in the South. I had never really been South before, so a kid out of New York going South is in trouble.

ISOARDI: Yeah. What was that like?

WIGGINS: Oh, it wasn't-- I don't even want to remember it.

ISOARDI: That bad?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: But it wasn't a mixed band, was it?

WIGGINS: Oh, no. No way! Not in those days!

ISOARDI: No kidding.

WIGGINS: Oh, boy. And all the horror stories you've heard are true, believe me. So I put in my notice. I forget just where I was. I was in it two weeks, and we were back in New York. I breathed a sigh of relief. I said, "Well, never again." Then Benny Carter called me. So I asked Benny, "Benny, I just finished doing a trip through the South with 'Pops.' You're not going South, are you?" "No way. Don't worry about a thing." I got on a train and woke up in Macon, Georgia. [laughter] I was so put out! I put in my notice right then.

ISOARDI: This tiny, old grandfather, Benny Carter! [laughter]

WIGGINS: But he wasn't so old then, though, remember?

ISOARDI: Yeah, that's right. [laughter]

WIGGINS: I put in my notice, and I think we ended up in Springfield, Ohio, or someplace. That's when I was supposed to leave. They didn't say a word. So Max Roach was in the band, and J. J. Johnson. They said, "Oh, Wig, come on, man. You know the boss, man." I said, "Man, he let me down." [laughter] So they prevailed upon me to take my notice back. So I went to Benny. I said, "Well, I want to take my notice back." He said, "I never took it in the first place." [laughter]

ISOARDI: That's a great story. Maybe if we talk to Benny Carter, I'll remind him of that. [laughter]

WIGGINS: Oh, he'll remember it. He made it up to me. We were playing some army camp. I don't know how he found out it was my birthday, but he gave me a birthday present on the twelfth of May. I'm trying to figure, "How could he possibly know my birthday?" He was that kind of guy, you know.

ISOARDI: Nice.

WIGGINS: So we're still friends until today. We see him quite often. We've got a lot of mutual friends, and they invite us together. In fact, we had Christmas dinner with him. Yeah. Old B. C.

ISOARDI: Have you seen this new film [Symphony in Riff] on him?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. I saw that, yeah. We were there.

ISOARDI: Did you like it?

WIGGINS: Oh, it was fantastic. I found out things about him I didn't even know. I knew he spent a lot of time in Europe, but I didn't know he had turned out that much work in Europe. God, he did a lot of things. Have you seen the film?

ISOARDI: Not yet.

WIGGINS: Oh, it's a treat. You won't believe it. It's like I'm discovering him all over again. He did--what do you call them--commercials, you know, background music. I don't know how he thought it even worked right for some of these things, they were so screwy, you know.

Well, talking about a sense of humor, I remember one time he was scoring a picture and working for [Dmitri] Tiomkin.

He said, "Wig," he said, "I've got this job to do for Tiomkin. I don't know what to do."

I said, "What do you mean you don't know what to do? You know it all."

He said, "Well, he's telling me he wants this music to sound like it's in E-natural, but it's not in E-natural." He said, "How do you do that?"

I said, "You've got it."

Evidently, Tiomkin loved him because he kept on hiring him, because Benny did a lot of ghost writing. It wasn't the right time for us in the movies, you know. So that's how he made a living. But he was really stumped by this thing. "Make it sound like E-natural, but it's not in E-natural."

And he had taken Tiomkin a lead sheet, which is like the whole thing for us, you know, the melody line and the

chord changes. You know, C7, G7, B-flat minor. And the jazz piano player played it right away. Tiomkin says, "What is this? Give me notes! What is this C and a seven and a B and that funny little thing?" [laughter] He wanted everything down. That's the difference between the classical guys and, you know--

ISOARDI: Yeah. Yeah.

WIGGINS: If you don't give them every note, they can't function.

ISOARDI: Yeah. If it's not in front of them, they can't play.

WIGGINS: When they play it, they play the heck out of it if you've got all the notes. But if you take the notes away, you get nothing. They don't know anything about improvising or even where the chords go.

ISOARDI: There was an album that was done--gee, what--thirty years ago, I'd say. José Iturbi, I think, tried to play some jazz, did an album?

WIGGINS: Oh, I remember it being-- Oh, it was pitiful.

ISOARDI: It was horrible. Oh, horrible.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: Just grinding. [to Lynn Wiggins] You found it? Johnny Guarnieri.

WIGGINS: Johnny Guarnieri, yeah.

ISOARDI: Johnny Guarnieri. A paisan, eh?

WIGGINS: He was working out at the Tail of the Cock. We used to go by there at least once a week. Yeah, he'd play you Tatum. If you were in the next room, you'd swear it was Tatum playing. Or if he played Garner, it would sound just like Garner, the touch and everything. But then later on he got on a five-four kick. Everything he played he put in five-four.

ISOARDI: Why?

WIGGINS: I don't know. [laughter] He got to be a little bit tiresome, you know.

ISOARDI: Maybe he heard [Dave] Brubeck and figured that's the way to go.

WIGGINS: It's all right for a few things, it works, but he did it on everything. And I wanted to say, "Hey, you know, play the tune, with the--" It was in his mind. That's how he played it. But he was a good piano player.

ISOARDI: What happened to him?

WIGGINS: He died!

ISOARDI: But he was still playing out at that place?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

LYNN WIGGINS: He had gone to New York.

WIGGINS: That's right. He got off here and went to New York. Yeah.

LYNN WIGGINS: He went back there, and he had a heart attack when he was in New York. Because this was his home. He had

a lot of students here, because a lot of his students used to come in and hear him.

ISOARDI: His main thing was playing in this club, then?

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, they liked him at the Tail of the Cock.

LYNN WIGGINS: Well, that was kind of like a home base for him.

WIGGINS: He'd leave town and come back to that all the time.

LYNN WIGGINS: Then he'd do stuff from that. But I think he had a lot of students.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

LYNN WIGGINS: I think that was really a big part of his time in music. And I think students who like the stride kind of style--

WIGGINS: Oh, well, he was from that school.

LYNN WIGGINS: Because I'm trying to remember the name of the young man who was his student--I hear him on record a lot--who worked at Superscope with me. Remember, he was the librarian in the music department there?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. So much for that.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Yeah. So, okay. So you're with Benny Carter, and you're in the Midwest.

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: How long were you with Benny Carter?

WIGGINS: I stayed with Benny until I went in the army in '44.

ISOARDI: That's quite a long-- You were with him a couple of years, then.

WIGGINS: Yeah. And that was the low-point of my life.

ISOARDI: When you went in the army?

WIGGINS: Well, we were just putting a-- We were getting ready to go on the road with the Nat King Cole Trio, Savannah Churchill--who sang with the band--Timmie Rogers, who was a comedian, and the Benny Carter Band. We were going to tour all over. This was 1944. And I'm set for this. I hadn't been ducking the army, but all the time we were traveling, my papers would get there right after we left. We were doing one-nighters, you know, and then they'd have to catch up with me. This time, we got to Los Angeles, we played the Orpheum Theatre, but we didn't leave town. We went to Billy Berg's Swing Club. When I got to work that night, there were my greetings. So J. J. Johnson and Max [Roach], they said, "Well, Wig, what are we going to do? How can we get you out of this?" Well, we tried everything, get a cold or-- You know. Nothing. I was healthy as pig. [laughter] I couldn't catch a cold, couldn't do anything.

So I went in the army. I went to Fort MacArthur, and then they sent me to Fort Ord. And to add insult to injury, the band played there.

ISOARDI: Benny Carter's Band?

WIGGINS: Yeah. They came to Fort Ord to play, and here I'm in army fatigues.

ISOARDI: Did you play with them?

WIGGINS: No! I didn't even want to see them. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, no. How terrible! [laughter]

WIGGINS: I was crushed, because I'd been looking forward to that tour. And I loved Nat. Nat was a great piano player, you know. And we became good friends. In fact, we were good friends all the time. They went their way on the road, and I went mine. From there, there was a lieutenant who was real nice to me--Lieutenant Fallon. I'll never forget it. He said, "Wig, they're getting ready to ship your group out to Fort Huachuca, and they're going overseas. I'm going to try to get you transferred up to Fort Lewis in Washington, and you can duck that." He did. So I spent all my army time in Fort Lewis, Washington.

ISOARDI: Yeah? I spent a little time there. [laughter]

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah? Then you know that rocky parade field.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I got a medical discharge up there.

WIGGINS: No kidding?

ISOARDI: So my memories of it are really fond! [laughter]

WIGGINS: Well, I had a ball there. I was with the special service, and we played the USO [United Service Organizations] every Saturday and all that. So that was

nice. We had class-A passes and only had to be in camp for Saturday parade, and after that we'd scatter.

ISOARDI: So that's pretty good.

WIGGINS: It wasn't too bad.

ISOARDI: You're playing in the band the whole time up there?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. I was playing with the special services band, and I also had a gig in town.

ISOARDI: Not bad.

WIGGINS: Yeah. And I like to go fishing. That's wonderful fishing country up there. So my army time was pretty nice.

ISOARDI: Yeah. That was like-- Buddy Collette was telling me he spent his war years outside of Oakland or Berkeley [California], I think.

WIGGINS: Now, wasn't he in that band in Chicago?

ISOARDI: Oh, at Great Lakes?

WIGGINS: Great Lakes, yeah.

ISOARDI: Yeah, but I think for training. And then he was stationed permanently somewhere east of San Francisco. I can't remember the name of it, but it was a place there. [Saint Mary's College Preflight School] Same kind of setup, you know. He played a couple days and then was able to take off.

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Nice.

WIGGINS: Yeah, it was fun. Yeah. I met a lot of guys. In fact, they're doing a story on Seattle now, and they seem to think I'm from Seattle, because they're doing the same kind of interview with me.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? [laughter]

WIGGINS: Yeah. Well, they're putting out a new magazine--How much leeway have I got?

ISOARDI: Let me stop that. [tape recorder off]

WIGGINS: Now, here's all this. See all the guys?

ISOARDI: And this is on black jazz in Seattle?

WIGGINS: Uh-huh. This is--oh, what's his name?--Bumps Blackwell. He was very big in Seattle. And then he came down here, he and his brother Charlie [Blackwell].

ISOARDI: Is that Duke Ellington?

WIGGINS: Duke, yeah. And Ernestine Anderson, from Seattle, too.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. Yeah, sure.

WIGGINS: So this is a new thing they're starting, and this is the first thing now. So they were down here asking me about all these people in Seattle.

ISOARDI: But you were up there just about two or three years or so, weren't you?

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, I stayed.

ISOARDI: When you got out of the army, you stayed up there for a bit?

WIGGINS: Yeah, I got married up there the first time [to I'Lee Patria Wiggins]. And that was my little-- It's a small pond, and I'm the big frog, you know. But I got all the best jobs. I would have stayed there, but then I went back to New York and I-- Then, the bass player [Charlie Oden] that I was in the army with, he lived in Oakland. He called me and said, "Hey, why don't you come down and put a trio together?" So I left Seattle, went to Oakland, and put a trio together, and we worked all over San Francisco and everything for a long time until I got a-- I joined Benny [Carter] again, yeah, in-- I guess that must have been '48. Then I left Benny and went back to San Francisco.

Chico Hamilton was playing with Lena Horne at the time. Chico and I had become friends when I first came out here, so he told Lena about me. Then he flew up to San Francisco--I was doing a hotel job--and she hired me. Then, after Lena, there was Kay Starr. I worked with Kay Starr. I worked with Dinah Washington for a while. Then I got into the moving picture business. I did a lot with Marilyn Monroe.

And then I just kind of jobbed around till I got a call from Helen Humes. That was about '71, I guess. She and Ellis Larkins had fallen out. She said, "I told Ellis I got another piano player!" [laughter] That's when she called me up. I went to work with her at the Cookery, and I stayed

with her till she died in '80 or '81.

ISOARDI: Really? When were you working with Marilyn Monroe?

WIGGINS: Oh, god. I forget the years right now. I really should know. But what happened-- You know who Jackie Mills is? A drummer?

ISOARDI: I know the name, but--

WIGGINS: Jackie used to play with Tommy Dorsey. Anyhow, he started working in the studios for Jack Cole, a choreographer. Jack wanted a piano player that was more or less jazz oriented, you know. Jackie and I had gone to school together. He told Jack Cole about me, and Jack hired me. So all the musicals that Marilyn did, Jackie and I would do. You know, we did the rehearsals and all that. I did the piano sketches for whoever was going to do the arranging. So that was a beautiful job, too.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Did you play on the soundtracks for those?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. In fact, I've got a couple of tunes in the picture Let's Make Love.

ISOARDI: Your originals?

WIGGINS: Yeah. They were original because we just made it up on the set. There was a dance sequence. Another one was called--

LYNN WIGGINS: Strip City.

WIGGINS: Strip City, yeah. They wanted something for,

like, strippers, and I just made this thing up, no music or nothing, just played it. I still get checks from it. [laughter]

ISOARDI: No kidding?

WIGGINS: Yeah!

ISOARDI: Can't beat it.

WIGGINS: Yeah, so that was a good experience. And Marilyn was a champ. I loved working with her, because, you know, she'd call us: "Gerry, I can't make it today. I'm sick." And I may not see her for two months, but I'm still on salary, you know. So I was at a-- Oh, what studio were we at? Anyhow, we used to rehearse at a studio that had a bungalow. She'd never show up. I was there, and I'd have my lunch brought to me. I read all those wonderful books they had. I'm a avid reader anyhow. And, finally, she'd show up when-- Whatever she had to do, we'd get it done in a hurry. She was a hard worker and took care of business. But that was a great life. The pay was good, the work wasn't hard, and then I was left to my own devices most the time. I did just about every musical that she did. I'd coach her for singing the tunes. She didn't have that much of a voice, but she made it work. So those were some of the good times.

ISOARDI: The first time you hit L.A., I guess that was with the Les Hite Band, then.

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: I guess you must have been out on Central Avenue fairly quickly.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. I stayed at the Dunbar Hotel.

ISOARDI: Did you really?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Is that where the band was staying, then?

WIGGINS: Oh, no, no. They were home.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. Home territory. Yeah.

WIGGINS: And the first thing I did was wake up the next morning, jaywalked, and got a ticket! [laughter]

ISOARDI: Only in L.A. Right? For a New Yorker, that must have been a shock! [laughter]

WIGGINS: I couldn't believe it.

ISOARDI: That happened to me, too. I got three jaywalking tickets my first two months here.

WIGGINS: I couldn't believe it. [laughter] I got even, though. I got to know all the cops on the beat. All of them. Those courtesy tickets, cards that they carry, I must have had fifty of them, including Mayor [Thomas] Bradley's. He was a lieutenant at the time, I think. I had his card, too. I had all the cops' cards. As fast as they could catch me for something else, they'd take the cards away, and I'd get another batch of cards.

I had one particular old cop, Todd Roark. He used to

keep me and Sabu, the Elephant Boy-- We were two wild youngsters in L.A. He'd keep us out of trouble, you know. He'd kind of watch over us. And then, there was another policeman, Gabby [Galbraith]. Gabby was a Tatum fan, and he had little private tapes of Tatum at his house. We'd all go over there and Art would play. And Gabby died-- I don't know whatever happened to that collection. I sure wanted it.

ISOARDI: Nobody knows?

WIGGINS: I couldn't catch up with his wife. She's kind of a high-powered lady and moved in the upper echelons, you know. I don't know what happened to her.

ISOARDI: I hope she didn't throw them out.

WIGGINS: Oh, I can't even remember her name, to tell you the truth. A friend of mine, a singer, Sonny Craver, we'd been threatening to go by and see Gabby--we knew he was ill--and we waited one day too long. We got there, and her next door neighbor, she heard us knocking. She said, "Who are you looking for?" I told her. She said, "Well, he died." So she invited us in. She was a nice Oriental lady. We talked and talked. She was very fond of Gabby, too. He wasn't a policeman; he was a nice guy. You know, I don't know what he was doing on a police force. [laughter] He wouldn't arrest anybody for nothing. All he thought about was jazz.

ISOARDI: Could you describe, when you first went there, what the avenue was like? I don't know. Maybe take me on a walking tour of it. What was it like when you came out of the Dunbar? What were the places that you hung out at? What were they like?

WIGGINS: Well, I was lucky. When I got here, there didn't seem to be too many piano players, so I was working all the time. I didn't really get a chance to go anywhere, you know. I was always in a club. I'd sub for Calvin Jackson at his place. I worked at a place called--

ISOARDI: Where was Calvin Jackson playing then?

WIGGINS: Oh, it was out in either Beverly Hills or Hollywood. I can never think of the name of this club, but at the end of it, I'll get it. Because that's where I met Al McKibbon. He was the regular bass player when I'd sub for Calvin. There were three clubs with the same name owned by the same people. He used to work at this particular one. I think it was Hollywood, yeah. On Central Avenue, there was the Dunbar Hotel, naturally. I worked at a place called the Turban Room. And there was Jack's Basket and a whole bunch of little after-hours places all up and down the street.

ISOARDI: Like which ones? Do you remember any in particular that you'd go to?

WIGGINS: My memory fails me. Unfortunately, in those days

I was drinking quite a bit. But I've stopped since. I was really into it, you know.

ISOARDI: What were you drinking?

WIGGINS: Anything they poured! [laughter] Yeah. I wouldn't say I was a drunk, because I was. I could always get to work and play, you know, but I was living high then. Honestly, my first wife used to wonder how I got to work. She said, "Well, if you get him to the piano, you don't have to worry about him. Just get him to the piano." [laughter] At that time I was hanging out with Irving Ashby and--who else?--Joe Comfort, Bill [William] Douglass, Ernie Freeman, and all the local guys. We were the wrongdoers, you know. [laughter] Yeah.

ISOARDI: The scene was pretty active then, wasn't it? With the late-night jams after the regular shows and--?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. After hours, yeah, it was-- You know, there was Ivie's Chicken Shack. There was-- Upstairs. What was his name?

ISOARDI: Lovejoy's?

WIGGINS: Lovejoy's, yeah. Shirley's Ritz Club. I worked there. Central Avenue was it. It was a little Fifty-second Street, you know. It really was a ball. This town was alive and really jumping. And crime was a word. It wasn't happening that way, you know. You could walk anywhere and nobody would bother you. It was just

beautiful. I'm surprised how it-- Well, everything is changed. New York is bad now, too. But Central Avenue could be as safe as it is in your own home. Now I don't go near. You know, it's like Harlem is. Bombed out, it just seems like. But we had a lot of fun there. Everybody had fun. It was really some good times. Everybody made money and everybody had a job. Guys didn't worry about working, because you'd leave one job and go right to the next. As they say, it was happening.

ISOARDI: A lot of clubs.

WIGGINS: A bunch of clubs. Yeah. Anyhow, I'm going to make another note, and I'll check with some people, and they'll remind me of what happened. But you're going to get all this from Lee Young, anyhow. He knows.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Well, he's not going to tell it like you're telling it, and he's not going to have the same--

WIGGINS: Well, he didn't get into the situations I got into. [laughter] Yeah, Lee was straight-arrow, you know. He was a golfer and was into sports and everything, so-- I don't think I've ever seen Lee take a drink. Maybe a watered-down one. He wasn't-- You know, he's a health nut.

ISOARDI: Really?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. He kept himself in good shape. He was an excellent golfer. Boy, could he play golf. He could

have been a pro.

ISOARDI: Was he one of the major figures down on the avenue then?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. Well, like I said, he was a businessman and also a good drummer. He worked down at the Turban Room with me for a while. He used to play down there with me, he and Charlie Drayton, who was Lena Horne's bass player at that time. Yeah, Lee was into everything. Like I said, he was a good businessman, an educated man, you know, and he knew where it was. He was more mature than the rest of us. He was older, but still, you know, he was no dummy. If I were to follow anybody, I guess I would pattern it after him, for his example.

ISOARDI: When you first went there, I guess about 1940, your first trip out there, who were some of the people you were playing with on the avenue? Do you remember? Or jamming with late-night?

WIGGINS: Oh, I think Art Pepper was here, Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray.

ISOARDI: Now, Art Pepper must have been a real young kid then, I guess.

WIGGINS: Oh, he was young, yeah. We were all young! [laughter] You know, just a bunch of crazy youngsters.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Now, Pepper must have been one of the few white guys playing down there. Or were there many other

white musicians who were coming down to jam?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I can't remember their names, but they were down there. You know, it was no segregated-type thing. Everybody was welcome. If you could play, you were even more welcome. In fact, a couple of good songwriters, Mike Stoller and Jerry Leiber, they used to hang out down there, and they must have been fifteen or sixteen or seventeen years old.

ISOARDI: Maybe you can talk a little bit about some of each of these people, what you remember about them. Let's begin with, say, Art Pepper. Do you remember anything specifically?

WIGGINS: Not really, no. You know, he was one of the guys who used to come and jam.

ISOARDI: How did he impress you as a player then?

WIGGINS: He was a good player. He was a good player then, yeah. Wardell Gray was fantastic. I met him through Benny Carter. He was something else. He was a great tenor player. He died too young.

ISOARDI: Yeah, much too young.

WIGGINS: And there were a lot of good musicians in L.A. Some of them you never got to hear about, but they were here. Like, I didn't know Lloyd Reese when he was playing. I met him after his playing days were over. I understand he was a great trumpet player. But he was like

the patriarch, you know. He was counseling all us youngsters. He was telling us what to do and what not to do. He used to hold court at his house where he had about six pianos in different rooms.

ISOARDI: I heard he was a tremendous teacher.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. They swear by him. Yeah. I didn't know him as a teacher or anything. I met him when I got here. He was out of the music business.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

WIGGINS: Yeah. But he was a nice man, and he was very nice to me. He liked Carl Perkins. Carl was the piano player who played with his elbow.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Funny style, eh?

WIGGINS: Oh, listen, but you should have heard him.

ISOARDI: I mean, he sort of twisted around?

WIGGINS: No, he'd sit like this: Carl Perkins sat at the piano with his whole body angled to the right, playing bass notes with his left elbow. He'd run up and down with his right hand and hit bass notes with his elbow.

ISOARDI: So he almost put his left arm on the piano?

WIGGINS: Yeah, he'd boom-chang, boom-chang. Unbelievable. And never miss.

ISOARDI: Incredible.

WIGGINS: I thought he had a finger in that elbow. [laughter] He was unbelievable.

ISOARDI: Where did he come from? He wasn't from L.A., was he?

WIGGINS: I don't know where Carl came from. I've probably got some liner notes on an album that we made together, and I'll look that up and see if it's-- I don't know. Because he had a brother too, Ed Perkins.

ISOARDI: Who was also a musician?

WIGGINS: A bass player. But he was into the Latin thing. He hung with the Latin guys all the time. It was the first time I ever heard a bass player say [sings syncopated salsa-style bass line]. I said, "He doesn't even know where [beat] one is?" [laughter] Of course, the new saying now is about the New York drummers. They tell you, "Hey, man, you've got to find [beat] one for yourself, because I'm doing my thing." [laughter] Ed worked with me a couple of times, but he had that Latin thing going. Carl just could swing. Oh, he's a fantastic piano player.

ISOARDI: You first heard him play down on the avenue?

WIGGINS: Yeah. He came to town and upset everybody. They'd say, "You've got to see this cat play piano. He must be deformed or something, because he sits sideways, and he's doing something with his elbow." They didn't realize he was hitting bass notes, you know. He made it sound so good. [sings, mimicking Perkins's piano style] When I saw that, I said, "Did I see you break out with

something?" He said, "No, it's just that I couldn't reach tenths as a kid, so I did this." Which made sense. He couldn't reach it.

ISOARDI: That's how he started doing it?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Because he couldn't play tenths?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Amazing. And he just kept with it.

WIGGINS: Kept with it. It was a beautiful style. I've got a couple of sides here by him here. I'll play them for you.

ISOARDI: I've got some of his stuff. I think he cut an album or two with Art Pepper that I've got.

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, he did a lot of things with Curtis Counce.

ISOARDI: Yeah. That was a fine group, Curtis Counce's group.

WIGGINS: Oh, that was a good group. Yeah, Harold Land and Jack Sheldon. Jack is a fine trumpet player, but what he's doing now, nobody realizes how good a jazzman he was. Jack could play! He could burn you up with that trumpet. But he's into his thing now, which is all right. I like what he does now. But in the old days, he was really a cooker.

And Curtis, he had, let's see, Harold Land, Carl

Perkins, Frank Butler, who was a hell of a drummer. They had a good group together.

ISOARDI: Yeah. What about Dexter Gordon? You saw him down on the avenue.

WIGGINS: Long, tall-- Boy, Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray used to wear me out. We'd go to a jam session, boy, and-- [Charles] Mingus and I used to walk out on them, because they'd get up there, each one of them would play twenty or thirty choruses, and we're back there sweating, you know. And they never thought about giving us a solo. If they gave a piano player a solo, maybe one chorus, and they were back in on him again. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, no!

WIGGINS: One night, Mingus said, "Wig, come on. Let's get out of here." And he picked up his bass, I left the piano, we left, and they didn't stop. They went right on with the drummer. [laughter] Didn't miss us at all. Oh, they'd work you to death. Yeah, that's why I don't go to jam sessions anymore. [laughter] The horn players seem to think that you're there for the express purpose of accompanying them. They don't care if you get a chorus or if you're heard. They don't mind you making the intros, and, after that, forget the piano player. They've got it. And they'd line up. There would be six or seven horn players. [laughter]

ISOARDI: All wanting to play twenty choruses!

WIGGINS: Yeah! They would all be up there; they'd be lined up! And the rhythm section would go crazy, you know. And they always wanted [claps hands extremely rapidly] tempos. "Let's do one up, man." "We just did one up!" "Well, let's do another one up." Oh, boy.

Yeah, those were some good days. I had a lot of fun.

ISOARDI: Any other names that stick out in your mind from when you first hit L.A. that impressed you?

WIGGINS: Well, there was a guitar player. What was his name? Joe-- I stayed with his mother for a while. She used to take musicians in, you know. I forget his name. I wish Chico was here, because Chico really-- You know, Chico and I really got tight in L.A.

ISOARDI: Chico Hamilton?

WIGGINS: Yeah. I met Chico, and I met Buddy Collette, and I met all the local guys, you know. Coming from New York, you know, they were really-- Most of the guys were strange. You know, they didn't dig New Yorkers at all.

ISOARDI: Why not?

WIGGINS: Well, they said we had an attitude.

ISOARDI: Did you? Did you?

WIGGINS: Yeah. [laughter] Well, at that time, I was under that false impression that these guys didn't know

anything out here, you know, this West Coast jazz. Everything here was so laid back. In New York, when you opened your eyes in the morning, it was business. You were out for the day to-- It was a hustle. I mean, in New York, you can't lay around and wait for a job. You've got to go out and find a job. Here, guys didn't seem to worry about whether they played or not. You know, a job would show up for them. In New York, every day was a scuffling day, and you had to be out there. When I got out here, guys didn't even want to rehearse. In New York, I'd rehearse with three or four groups with no job in sight, but just to play. Out here, you ask a guy to rehearse, he wants to know where the job is, when is the job, and how much does it pay.

ISOARDI: Really?

WIGGINS: If there's no job, they don't want to rehearse. They're getting a little bit better now. They're finding out that getting organized is much better. But before, they didn't care about rehearsing. So I was an outcast. But then I finally made a lot of friends here, and that's where I stayed. I grew to love L.A.

ISOARDI: You didn't have many of these guys come up to you and say, "Well, what's going on in New York? What's happening?"

WIGGINS: They couldn't care less.

ISOARDI: Really? Nobody was curious?

WIGGINS: No. They had their thing. That's natural, you know. They had the best of all things. They had the studio jobs, they had all these clubs to work at, so they couldn't care less what was happening on the East Coast. And finally, the guys on the East Coast had to come out here to make a living, you know. Which they did. They invaded California. But, by that time, it seemed to be a meeting of the minds, and everybody was glad to see them, you know, to have them come, because you get new ideas. You know, it's always good to hear what the other guy is doing.

I remember when Max came out with his group. He came out with Clifford Brown and--

ISOARDI: About 1954 or something like that?

WIGGINS: Yeah. Something like that, yeah. And they were well received. And they were playing. Oh, they were burning this town up. Everybody used to go and listen to them.

ISOARDI: Really? Where were they playing?

WIGGINS: It was a place down from-- Marla Gibbs's Memory Lane it is now. At that time it was called-- Larry Hearn owned it, and I was in the house band. They had the house trio. That was about six or seven blocks east of that, called the-- What was it? The Swing Club or the Jazz Club

or something. I forget what they called it. But that's where all the action was for real hard jazz. [Jazz City]

ISOARDI: On what? Santa Barbara [Avenue]? What they call Martin Luther King [Jr. Boulevard] now?

WIGGINS: It was Santa Barbara [Avenue] then, yeah. In fact, they've just reopened. They're trying to do something with that little place. I don't think anything's going to happen with it, though.

ISOARDI: You mean the club you were just talking about? The Swing Club or whatever?

WIGGINS: Yeah. That wasn't the name of it, but-- No, Billy Berg had the Swing Club. This was called something else, and I can never think of the name. But it was lively. That's the first time I heard Clifford Brown.

ISOARDI: So that was Clifford Brown, Max Roach-- I guess Harold Land was playing tenor with them?

WIGGINS: I forget who the tenor player was. I know Richie Powell was playing piano. And this friend of mine, John Anderson, who was a good trumpet player and great arranger-- We were good buddies. He had a big band around here. He was a good arranger. And he kept after me. He said, "You've got to go hear Clifford, man." "I don't want to hear no Clifford Brown." So finally he just dragged me down there one night. He blew my mind. You know, this guy was playing trumpet like I'd never heard before. If he'd

have lived, I don't think you'd be hearing about Wynton [Marsalis]. [laughter] He was electrifying. He could find notes that I didn't believe existed and made it sound so good.

ISOARDI: Yeah, those are beautiful recordings.

WIGGINS: Yeah. He was a fantastic trumpet player.

ISOARDI: You know, as tremendous as [Wynton] Marsalis seems to be on technique and all--

WIGGINS: He's not true jazz.

ISOARDI: Yeah, it just doesn't move you. It doesn't--

WIGGINS: Well, he's playing-- This is their day now, so they've got this type of music that they play.

ISOARDI: But it's too formal, almost.

WIGGINS: Well, it's a little stilted, I think. But Branford [Marsalis], now, he's a cooker. We did that album, Digital Duke. Mercer [Ellington] flew me back there to do that. He used Sir Roland Hanna and myself on piano, and he had Branford there, man. Branford came in, and he said, "Let's do 'Cotton Tail.'" And they put the boom down, and he sat back in a chair like this. Whew!

ISOARDI: Really? [laughter]

WIGGINS: Oh! He had everybody going crazy. That was a hell of a band. They had Eddie Daniels on clarinet, Britt Woodman, Al Grey, Clark Terry-- That band was popping. Whew! I told Mercer, I said, "I should have paid you to

send for me just to make this!" Oh, boy, but he played. Whew! Yeah, that's when you're really glad to be a part of something, you know. Then, of course, my son [Gerald Foster Wiggins, Jr.] was playing bass. That knocked me out, you know.

ISOARDI: He played bass on that?

WIGGINS: Oh, he worked with Mercer, yeah.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. Yeah. Is he still with the Ellington band? Or has he left? No, he left them.

WIGGINS: No. He left Mercer and went with Pearl Bailey and Louis Bellson. Then he left them and was in Paris doing a show. And then he came back to the States. Now he's working with Al Grey. So--

ISOARDI: Oh, Al Grey has a son who's playing with him, eh?

WIGGINS: Yeah. And they're trying to con me to be in the band, so-- [laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, if the Marsalises can do it, you know. [laughter]

WIGGINS: I'm too old. I can't stand that road anymore. My days for that are over. It would be fun to try, though.

ISOARDI: So then you came back. You said you traveled around a bit. Then, when did you come back to L.A.? I guess you settled in here around '47, '48, or--?

WIGGINS: I think '50 is when I really settled, when I

joined Lena Horne.

ISOARDI: But had you been going in and out of L.A. before that?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. I'd been moving around.

ISOARDI: All the time?

WIGGINS: Yeah. Well, I was working with Kay Starr. Then I was working with Spike Jones's wife, Helen Grayco. I used to go to [Las] Vegas with her all the time. And Kay had to go to Vegas, Reno, and [Lake] Tahoe. I played with a couple of bands. I forget the guys' names now. A couple of big bands. Because most of the time was with Benny Carter and Louis and-- I can't think of this man's name.

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ISOARDI: Let me go back and ask you a couple of things about your New York days, and then we'll get on up to where we finished last time, which I think was about the late forties or so, when you were spending a lot of time on the West Coast, etc. Let me take you back a bit and ask you about your early development as a musician. You talked last time about how important--certainly in getting you started, and possibly for a little longer--your mother [Eleanor Foster Wiggins] was in getting you to practice and spending the hours and perfecting your craft and all. I'd like you to talk a little bit about the transition sort of from that time where your mother's sort of the main force to where you really become a self-motivated musician and you're doing it because you love it and this is something you want to do. When did that happen? How did that come about?

WIGGINS: Well, at the time I was taking lessons-- Like I say, I started with a lady teacher, Margaret Murray. And from her I went to Carl Diton, who, at that time, had Calvin Jackson as his star pupil. He was always throwing Calvin up in my face about, "Well, Calvin is doing this," and I really wasn't doing it. I wasn't that interested in classics, although I did learn quite a bit. I really

didn't take an interest in piano till I found out when you go into parties, the girls would flock around when you started to play. I had learned a few little jive tunes, they called them. And then a cousin of mine brought me a couple of Art Tatum records. At that time, I was a Teddy Wilson fan. I still am, but, I mean, I hadn't heard Tatum at that time. I heard these records, I thought it was a couple of guys playing all at once, you know. He floored me. I didn't think a piano could be played that way. I'd been hearing Teddy Wilson. He used to come up to the High School of Music and Arts with Benny Goodman and do concerts, you know. So I heard Tatum, and I wore those records out. Of course, a guy couldn't do anything, because I didn't have the faintest idea of what he was doing. I knew it was a whole lot of piano.

Anyhow, fortunately, I met him later on. I was working in the Village [Greenwich Village], and a guy said, "We're going by Ruben's," which was an after-hours place uptown. I forget exactly where. One-hundred-thirty-some-odd Street; I forget. Tatum used to come there every morning. In fact, all the piano players went there after they got off of work in the Village. It was like four o'clock in the morning; we'd go by there. Somebody took me by one night. I forgot who. And all the piano players were there, you know, they-- Teddy [Wilson], Willie "The

Lion" [Smith], you name them. They were all taking their turns. I hid by the door, because I was too young to be there, really. And Tatum came in and everybody scattered and left the piano to him and he proceeded to teach piano for about three hours. Well, that flabbergasted me. Then I got to meet him, and we became pretty good friends. He got me my gig with Stepin Fetchit.

ISOARDI: So Tatum is really what turned you around, then.

WIGGINS: Oh, I think he's turned most piano players around, you know. [laughter]

ISOARDI: But, I mean, in terms of your sort of becoming a self-motivated person.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: That's when you knew you wanted to play piano?

WIGGINS: Uh-huh. But I found out later on that what I was going through all the rest of the piano players had been through. They just gave up chasing him. I was hard-headed, but I eventually gave up, too. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Let me also ask you-- You mentioned last time-- I think afterwards you said you had a couple stories that I wanted to get on tape with you about Bud Powell. Maybe you can talk a bit about your relationship with him and how you guys used to hang around New York.

WIGGINS: Well, it wasn't that much of a relationship. We

were just-- Three of us, Bud and-- I cannot think of the piano player's name [Alan Tinney]. He's living in upstate New York now. Oh, God. I saw him just a few years ago. He had a brother that played guitar. Anyhow, he and Bud and myself, we used to run around town trying to find piano players to jump on, who thought they were a good piano player. We'd try to show him up. It was what they called cutting sessions in those days, to see who the best was.

ISOARDI: How old were you and Bud Powell?

WIGGINS: Oh, I guess we were in our late teens, you know.

ISOARDI: So this is the late thirties, early forties?

WIGGINS: Oh, late thirties. Yeah, that was our thing, man.

ISOARDI: How did you meet Bud Powell?

WIGGINS: I don't know. I don't recall the meeting, you know. He's just one of the guys who played piano who was around. You know, there was no momentous moment or anything. Nobody knew who was going to be anybody at that time. You know, we were just a bunch of youngsters playing.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Let me ask you about-- You're sort of in a unique position in a way, because of a lot of the people that we've talked to, at least so far, are born in L.A., or spent most of their lives in L.A. But you came out here as an already full-fledged professional musician.

WIGGINS: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: So you're in kind of a unique position to contrast L.A. and New York. Maybe you could talk a little bit about-- Well, how did L.A. strike you musically when you first got here, compared to New York?

WIGGINS: Uhhh-- [laughter] Well, they weren't entranced with me, believe me. Anything from New York was, you know-- New Yorkers were supposed to have an attitude, and I guess we did. But in defense of New York, everything that happens happens first in New York. You know, I don't care where you are on earth, if it's music and it's jazz, it happens in New York at that particular time. And L.A. has always been a little bit laid back. But the reason for that is there's a million clubs in New York, and L.A. is so scattered. There's very few jazz clubs in comparison to New York, so-- You know, they don't have the drive out here. They didn't have the drive out here at that time. Everything was laid back. The guys played their jobs, and that was it.

ISOARDI: And that was sort of your first impression of Central Avenue when you hit it?

WIGGINS: Yeah. Oh, they were swinging on Central Avenue, but it was a different type of swing. You know, it-- Bop hadn't gotten out yet, you know, but the guys were experimenting with it already in New York. Diz [Dizzy

Gillespie] was really-- Everybody says Bird [Charlie Parker] started bebop. Well, I didn't hear Bird till way later, and I heard Diz when Diz was just getting it together. He was playing flat fives and raised ninths, and nobody knew what he was doing. I don't know if he knew what he was doing, but it was sounding good. But anyhow, I got lucky. I met the right guys out here, and they finally accepted me. It's like home now. I know I'm not going back to New York to live. I don't intend to. I wouldn't know what to do there anymore. That hustle and bustle, they get up in the morning and scuffle. Bad weather. Of course, the weather hasn't been too great here for the first few days. [laughter]

ISOARDI: New Yorkers probably wouldn't say that. They'd say you've really become an Angeleno. [laughter]

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. Well, I'm going back on the twenty-third to do an album with Scott Hamilton, on the twenty-third of this month [February]. So I'll find out about the New York weather, I know. But I'm going to go in and spend one day recording and come straight back.

ISOARDI: Only one day?

WIGGINS: Well, I'll leave here the twenty-third, we record on the twenty-fourth, and I'm catching the first thing out of there on the twenty-fifth.

ISOARDI: You don't have--

WIGGINS: Well, I don't have any family left there anymore. I've got one aunt [Celia Jenkins]--I want to check on her while I'm there--and that's all that's left of my mother's family. So there's really nothing in New York for me to stay for. I've got a lot of friends, but they're busy. They're always busy in New York, you know. If you can catch them, good, if you can't, still good.

ISOARDI: Yeah. How would you compare the racial situation in the music business in New York as compared to L.A.? When you first came out here, did you sense any differences or--?

WIGGINS: Well, at that time, when I came out here, there were two unions. There was the black union [American Federation of Musicians, Local 767] and the white union [Local 47].

ISOARDI: And in New York it was one?

WIGGINS: It was all one, yeah.

ISOARDI: One union.

WIGGINS: It didn't matter to me at all, because in New York I wasn't in the union anyhow.

ISOARDI: You weren't?

WIGGINS: I didn't have to be.

ISOARDI: Oh. So you could find plenty of work in New York without a union card?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. In fact, in later years, I started to

join, and they went through all this rigamarole that you had to sit home for six months and couldn't take jobs. I couldn't afford that, you know.

ISOARDI: Oh, that was the cabaret card back there. Was that it?

WIGGINS: No, not so much that. It was just to join the union.

ISOARDI: You had to sit out after you applied?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: You had to sit out six months without a regular job?

WIGGINS: Well, six months or three months or whatever it was. It was too long to-- You know, you could take a casual now and then, but you couldn't work anyplace steady. That was a little rough. So I applied for the card. Then I got a job and went out of town. I didn't bother anymore, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So how did that compare with the situation in L.A. when you got here? Did you join 767 or--?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. I joined 767.

ISOARDI: As soon as you got here?

WIGGINS: No. I was in and out of here quite a bit, you know. But I finally settled, and then I joined. And it was nice.

ISOARDI: When did you join the local?

WIGGINS: I don't know, but I know it had to be over thirty years ago.

ISOARDI: What did you get out of joining 767?

WIGGINS: I was a union musician. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah. Yeah. But Central was kind of mixed, wasn't it? There were nonunion jobs as well as union jobs? Or was it--? If you wanted to get good gigs, did you have to have your card?

WIGGINS: No, I think everything on Central was more or less union. I think. I know I usually filed the contracts on all the jobs I did.

ISOARDI: Did you?

WIGGINS: And they had one union guy, Fain, Elmer Fain. He was-- Talking about a policeman.

ISOARDI: He was what?

WIGGINS: A policeman, I said. He'd come by the job and look, and if he saw somebody on the stand he didn't know, he'd ask for their card, and if they didn't have a card or weren't in the union, off the stand you went. The guys hate-- Well, not hated him, but they sure hated to see him coming. [laughter] He was a big, burly son-of-a-gun, you know, and he was all business. He had a smile that would freeze ice. [laughter] But he turned out to be a pretty good guy, though, really. You get that kind of a reputation, and you're really not that way. But he was a

businessman.

ISOARDI: Well, it sounds like he took care of business for the union.

WIGGINS: He did. He really did. Maybe a little bit too much. He was the unforgiving type, you know. Anything he caught you wrong at, that was it. There was no, "Well, don't do it again." That was it. You went before the board right away.

ISOARDI: Really? Did you ever--?

WIGGINS: Needless to say, I stayed at the board. [laughter] But they liked me at the board, so I always got off. [laughter] For some reason, they never would do anything to me.

ISOARDI: What did he keep coming after you for?

WIGGINS: Oh, jamming when I shouldn't have been, sitting in on somebody else's job when I wasn't supposed to be. A lot of little technical-- Late with the payment of the dues or whatever, you know. Nothing earthshaking, but he was that much of a stickler for it.

ISOARDI: Sheesh. What would he do? Come in and pull people off the stand? Or did he at least let you finish out a set?

WIGGINS: No. Off right now. Yeah, he was a pretty tough customer. But I got to know him, and he wasn't that bad. But, you know, at that time, I was young and full of that

ginger, and I didn't want anybody to interfere with my fun, whatever it was. [laughter] But Fain and I became pretty good friends.

ISOARDI: Really? I guess he must have been a musician at some point, but--

WIGGINS: I imagine so, but he'd been on the job a long time before I'd gotten here, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Who was president of the 767 when you got here?

WIGGINS: I think Leo-- Leo-- Leo's name-- I can't remember Leo's last name. He's still alive. In fact, I saw him a few months ago. Leo Davis.

ISOARDI: And he's still alive?

WIGGINS: He's still alive, yeah.

ISOARDI: Aha. I'll have to make a note of that.

WIGGINS: Yeah. And when you get with Fletcher, he knows all this.

ISOARDI: Fletcher Smith?

WIGGINS: Oh, Fletcher can tell you everything. You're going to love him.

ISOARDI: All right. Yeah, we'll have to contact him. Great. You must have been around, then, during the amalgamation of the unions.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: Were you involved in that?

WIGGINS: No more than the voting on it, you know. I think the leaders of that were mostly Buddy Collette, Benny Carter, Marl Young-- Those are the names that come to mind right now. They spearheaded it.

ISOARDI: Yeah. What was that like when it was happening? Was there a lot of support for it? Were there differences within 767 over whether it was a good idea or not? Do you remember that?

WIGGINS: Well, since I'm not into politics of any kind, I didn't pay too much attention, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah. How did you vote?

WIGGINS: Oh, I voted for it. I thought it was a good thing, yeah.

ISOARDI: You thought it was a good idea?

WIGGINS: Yeah. I think some of the guys felt at the time that, if it was amalgamation, they would lose the jobs that they had, but it didn't turn out that way. In fact, it opened up more opportunities for them.

ISOARDI: Did it? How did it do that?

WIGGINS: Well, they weren't restricted to Central Avenue and things like that. Before, they never tried to go anywhere else. Now they had the whole territory open to them. It was open all the time, but there was that feeling, "Well, no, that belongs to 47, so we won't mess with it." There was no law that said you couldn't work the

territory. But it was best that they all got together. And it went off kind of smooth. I don't remember any incidents, you know. Because Buddy and all the guys had been working with the white guys, anyhow, so it was no big change for them.

ISOARDI: Right. I know that they had organized an orchestra, a community orchestra, at one point. Were you active in that at all? They got some of the white musicians and the black musicians, and they got them together into some kind of a symphonic orchestra as a way of sort of getting the two locals together.

WIGGINS: I don't remember that, because I really hadn't settled in L.A. I was doing a lot of traveling, still. I was with Benny [Carter], and I stayed with Kay Starr, Lena Horne, so I was mostly out of town. In fact, when I came to town, it was kind of hard for me to get a job, because they'd say, "Well, don't hire Wiggins, because he'll be going with a singer before you know it," you know. "He's not going to be here." [laughter] Which was true.

ISOARDI: You obviously liked doing that. You obviously like playing with singers, don't you?

WIGGINS: At that time I did.

ISOARDI: Not so much anymore?

WIGGINS: Well, it's another way of life now, you know.

ISOARDI: What do you mean?

WIGGINS: I've backed a lot of people, and I still enjoy playing for singers, but I'd rather have a job where I can play for myself, you know. I think it's great to be with a singer, especially a name singer. You make pretty good money and everything. But you lose yourself. Like, well, Billy Daniels had his piano player [Benny Payne], you know. He was a good piano player, but it was always Billy. And then Billy Eckstine had Bobby Tucker, who's a fantastic piano player, but he's only had two jobs in life: Billie Holiday and Billy Eckstine.

ISOARDI: I'll bet you not many people know who he is.

WIGGINS: No, not really. The people like myself, the musicians, they know who he is, and he's a monster. But he's always the background man. And sooner or later your ego's going to say, "Hey, let me see what I can do on my own."

ISOARDI: When did you sort of reach that point? Or had you sort of felt that all along?

WIGGINS: I kind of felt it all along, but I was taking the easy way out. I think what brought it to a head, I worked with Helen Humes. That was the last steady job I had with a singer. When she died, I was kind of at my wit's end. I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I started getting jobs around L.A., you know, with a trio, single, and it wasn't so bad. Then I had my contacts with George Wein, because,

with Helen, we went to Europe every few years with George Wein's thing [Grand Parade of Jazz]. So I knew people all over in Europe. And George would still hire me occasionally, you know. But it wasn't playing for singers; it was playing with other musicians. I kind of got to like that. And then I broke my way into just doing a solo or trio or duo, which is more fun.

ISOARDI: Yeah, you and Andy Simpkins are obviously having a whole lot of fun.

WIGGINS: Oh, well, that's unbelievable. Andy is--

ISOARDI: Telepathic.

WIGGINS: We do some things sometimes that, actually, there's no reason for it. We will play the same thing, something that we've never done before. You know, we just go a certain way, and we look at each other like a couple of idiots and wonder why that happened and how did that happen. It's really uncanny. Plus, I like him, he likes me. So we don't have any problems, We don't have money problems or who's getting too much of the limelight or anything like that. We just play. Whoever should be soloing at the moment-- He solos. You know, it's not, "You've got two choruses and I've got two choruses." If he wants to stretch out and do five or six when he's playing something, well, I go along with it, and he does the same with me. So it's a good feeling.

ISOARDI: Yeah. It certainly is in the audience.

[laughter]

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, with us there's no jealousy involved or, you know, "I'm the boss." It's just the two of us, and we get along great. I can't remember having a job when I have been so happy. I look forward to going to work every night. And if I'm in a bad mood when I get there, listen, he plays me out of it right away. I do the same for him.

ISOARDI: That's nice.

WIGGINS: Since we've been at the [Maple Drive] Restaurant, we've only had one bad night. It wasn't a bad night. It was just, I guess, uninspired, you know. And the reason I know that is because one of the guys, one of the waiters, said, "Gosh, you guys don't seem to be as happy as you usually are," you know. And he was right. You know, we were doing the job and taking care of it, but that spark wasn't there that particular night. That only happened one night, and that was very unusual.

ISOARDI: Yeah. You should tape some of those things, those live performances. Boy!

WIGGINS: We never think about it. Every night he says, "I'm going to bring a tape recorder." I say, "I'm going to bring one." The wife [Lynn Charney Wiggins] says she's going to bring one. We never do.

ISOARDI: Oh, too bad. Too bad. Some nice albums there.

WIGGINS: But the thing is, I think we'd be too conscious of the tape.

ISOARDI: Would you?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: Well, you have to tell Lynn not to tell you when she's going to do it, and have her bring it in.

WIGGINS: I still think it's against the union rules. I don't know, but--

ISOARDI: Oh. Let me ask you about women jazz musicians. When you came out to Central, were there many down on the avenue that you knew of?

WIGGINS: Yeah, some good piano players. Well, Dorothy Donegan was in town. You know she can play. Well, we mentioned a couple of girls the other day, and it's been so many years since I've even heard their names, I can't think of their names right now. Oh, there was Lady Will Carr. I think she's still around. She's a good piano player. And the girl we just missed a couple of days ago-- I can't think of her name. She was a very good piano player. And there was an alto player, yeah, and I can't think of her name. [Vi Redd] Isn't that dumb? She was probably the best around at the time.

We've got a whole bunch of them now. We've got girls who can play rings around just about anybody. And I love them all, because they really take care of business.

You've got Stacy Rowles, Jimmy Rowles's daughter. She's fantastic. There's Liz Kinnon. She was playing somewhere on Ventura Boulevard with Octavia Bailey, the bass player. She is fantastic. You've got Betty O'Hare. She plays trumpet, trombone, and all that--flugelhorn, baritone horn. And you've got some good bass players: Nedra Wheeler, a girl I just heard the other night that-- One of Red Callender's students. I always get the name wrong. What is her name? Leslie [Baker]. I forget Leslie's last name, but I heard her last Saturday, and she was really playing. She was sitting there with Earl Palmer and Art Hillery. She was taking care of business, really taking care of business.

ISOARDI: Well, there are certainly many more around today.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: But back then--

WIGGINS: We had Nellie Lutcher in those days, you know.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. And there were people, I guess, like Clora Bryant playing down there.

WIGGINS: Clora was on, yeah.

ISOARDI: And Vi Redd.

WIGGINS: Vi Redd is who I was trying to think of.

ISOARDI: Oh, the saxophonist. For some reason I thought she was a tenor player. But she played alto?

WIGGINS: No, alto. Yeah, she used to know Charlie Parker

all the way, every note. Bird! [laughter]

ISOARDI: What was it like for them? I mean, being a woman down on Central playing?

WIGGINS: Well, I didn't get to see too much of them.

ISOARDI: Did you play with any of those people?

WIGGINS: I imagine so on different occasions, yeah. But not that much, because I usually kept a trio. The horn players drove me crazy. Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray, they'd be in a session, and the two of them would sit there and play ninety million choruses, and all we'd do is sit there and play background for them. So with horns-- It's not that bad now. It's still bad enough, but I can do without the horns. [laughter] Yeah. They're awfully long-winded. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Can you tell me, what were the ropes down on the avenue then? How did you go about getting a job, getting gigs? Or how did you get your first gigs when you came in? Now, you were probably fairly well known.

WIGGINS: Well, I don't think there were too many piano players, really. A lot of guys were horn players who started playing piano because there weren't enough piano players to go around. There were several of the guys who were tenor players and all that, and they said, "Heck, I can't get a job, so I'll start playing piano." And they played piano and made out pretty good.

ISOARDI: So you had no trouble at all lining stuff up, then, I guess. Whenever you wanted to work, you could work?

WIGGINS: Yeah, I could work.

ISOARDI: How would you get most jobs? You go to the clubs on your own? Or you go through 767? Or your friends would give you a call?

WIGGINS: Guys would call you. Well, the union has never been a hiring association, now. All they do is they're supposed to protect your rights. They don't get jobs for you. Although people do call the union for musicians, and sometimes you'll get a job through the union. But that's not often. Not in those days. Naturally, whoever's in the office would call their favorite, their buddies, so you had that to contend with. Which is all right, too. I don't see anything wrong with it. It may be showing favoritism, but, heck, you've got a guy, and you're in a position to give him a gig, give him the gig. I don't care what you say. It's always going to be that kind of a thing. That's human nature.

ISOARDI: So it was pretty much just hanging out and meeting people?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. And the people who liked my playing would call me, you know. My studio work came through Jackie Mills, who used to be a drummer with Tommy Dorsey.

He got into the motion picture business, and Jack Cole was crazy about him. Every time they made a musical, they would hire Jackie Mills. Jackie swung me in on the deal. That's how I got to do so much work with Marilyn Monroe, and I did a lot of movie work with Benny Carter.

ISOARDI: When he was writing scores for films?

WIGGINS: No, when he was actually in the picture himself.

ISOARDI: Acting in the picture?

WIGGINS: No, just the band. You know, it would be a shot of the band. He would have the band in the picture.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. I see.

WIGGINS: You know, you hear Benny Carter, and they cut to him for two or three seconds, and they go on with the picture. Most of the time, we weren't even playing. I guess other guys recorded it, and there we were, you know, sidelining.

ISOARDI: Faking along with the soundtrack?

WIGGINS: Yeah. Which was okay. It paid. And if you didn't have anything else to do, it was great. It pays a hell of a lot more [now] than it did then. I think it was about $25 a day then. Now it's about $125.

ISOARDI: So, for the young guys coming up who didn't come into town as established musicians, or they were teenagers hanging out on the avenue, would they generate jobs? It was just meeting people, playing jams late at night, and

hoping somebody'd like them?

WIGGINS: I was a young guy myself, so-- [laughter]

ISOARDI: Okay. Well, you were a young established musician.

WIGGINS: Well, not so well established. But, you know, I was in the same category, so I couldn't tell you too much about that. All I can tell you about is what happened with me.

That reminds me. We were talking the other day-- Red [Callender] and I were talking about something, and we said, "Well, remember how we used to talk about the old guys?" We said, "Now we're the old guys!" [laughter]

ISOARDI: A little while ago we talked to Lee Young. I'll be interviewing him.

WIGGINS: Yeah. Oh, that must have been wonderful.

ISOARDI: Well, we're setting him up now. But Dale [Treleven], the director of the [UCLA Oral History] Program, whom you met that first time we came out here, was talking to Lee Young, and I think he was telling him who we were talking to, and he goes, "Aw, they're just kids!" [laughter]

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: "They don't know!" [laughter]

WIGGINS: Oh, Lee would know. Oh, Lee would know. Yes.

ISOARDI: So you're among the group of kids.

WIGGINS: That's okay. [laughter] I'm glad I'm still here with the-- Yeah. No, Lee really knows it all. Yeah. Well, see, he had a big-time brother. You know. You can't beat that.

ISOARDI: They don't come much bigger.

Let me throw out some individual names and see what you remember about them or whatever. I suppose we can begin at the top of your list, probably. Last time, you talked a bit about Art Tatum. You've talked about when you first met him in New York, etc., but when you came out to L.A., then, by the late forties or so, he was out here permanently, I guess.

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: How did you run into him? Was he already out here?

WIGGINS: Oh, wherever he was playing, I'd go, you know, if I possibly could. And, by the same token, wherever I was playing, he'd come by, which was very nice, you know. I'd hear this voice in the audience say, "Gearl," and I knew it was Art. [laughter] I'd make sure I'm playing something good.

ISOARDI: Well, you know, I talked to Bill [William] Douglass a while ago. Bill was talking--

WIGGINS: Bill played-- Yeah.

ISOARDI: He was talking about Art Tatum, and at some point

he referred to Art Tatum's favorite pianists. I said, "Oh, really? Well, who were Tatum's favorites?" He goes, "Oh, Nat [King] Cole and Gerry Wiggins."

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, Nat was something else, now. I guess you never really heard him play piano, eh?

ISOARDI: See, when I was growing up, in the fifties, he was singing all the pop songs, so I didn't know his piano music till much later.

WIGGINS: Oh, man, now, he was a whiz. He used to come down to Memory Lane all the time right after closing time. Larry Hearn would shut up the joint, and it would just be a few of the regulars and my trio. Nat would sit there and play till daylight, and you ain't never heard such piano. Oh, man. He was a good player. I was sorry he started singing. It made him a million dollars, of course, but, I mean, he was--

ISOARDI: Was this after he started singing, pretty much? Or was this--?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. This was after he started singing. Anytime he was in town, he'd get by Memory Lane.

ISOARDI: Just to play piano.

WIGGINS: Just to play piano. Oh, it was good for him. You know, even when he was very sick, he came by. Yeah. He'd sit up there with us, and he couldn't do wrong. He was a marvelous piano player. Oh, man. He had all the

little tricks and everything and a beautiful touch. A very distinctive style. Yeah. And Nat was a good friend, too. Yeah.

Well, when Tatum got out, he had like a little troupe that followed him around. There was Willie Hawkins, who was a guy that you probably never heard of him and you probably never will. He played everything in F-sharp, but he had all of Tatum's stuff. This just used to knock Tatum out. He'd try to play Tatum, you know, and--

ISOARDI: Just watching that guy play all the black keys? [laughter]

WIGGINS: By that time, we had a whole bunch of good piano players out here. You know, Arnold Ross was fantastic. There's a whole lot. I can't even name them. Carl Perkins, with the elbow. He had a brother [Ed Perkins], a bass player, who played Latin stuff all the time. He was very good at that. There's Jimmy Bunn. He's still around. He's a good piano player. God, I have to look in the book and find some of these guys. But they were here, and they could play, all of them. Oh-- God, I just saw his wife two or three weeks ago.

ISOARDI: Is he alive?

WIGGINS: No, he's dead.

ISOARDI: Hampton Hawes?

WIGGINS: Hampton Hawes, yeah. I saw his wife at a

party. I hadn't seen Jackie [Hawes] in years. We were over at Betty Bryant's house, and she was there. She ran up to me and said, "You don't remember me, do you, Wig?" I said, "No." She said, "Jackie Hawes." I fell out. I grabbed her, you know. It had been so long. Let's see. Nellie Lutcher, and those guys like Lorenzo Flennoy.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. He was a mainstay on the avenue.

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, he was Central Avenue. Of course, he's gone now. You can't talk to him. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah. But, you know, when I was doing some research, I was looking through a lot of old issues of the California Eagle, that old newspaper. And looking at the advertisements in the entertainment section, and going back--I don't know--to the thirties or something, his trio was--

WIGGINS: Oh, Lorenzo, yeah.

ISOARDI: It was just there all the time in all the different clubs.

WIGGINS: Lorenzo and-- Let's see who else. Oh, there's a guy by the name of Bill Gaither. I don't know if he's still around. He was a saxophone player. He was pretty busy on the avenue, too. I don't even know if he's-- Let me see if he's still in the union. [refers to Local 47 directory] I haven't heard his name in years.

ISOARDI: Gaither?

WIGGINS: Gaither.

ISOARDI: I haven't come across that one.

WIGGINS: Yeah. I don't know if he's still playing music. No, he doesn't seem to be in here. He might be dead, for all I know. Yeah. Well, you know Bill Douglass. Yeah, he was on the scene.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you a bit more about Tatum. Was he out here permanently then?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: By the late forties or so?

WIGGINS: He had a home here, yeah.

ISOARDI: Where was he? Just off the avenue or--?

WIGGINS: Oh, I don't know where he stayed, but his wife is still here.

ISOARDI: She's still out here?

WIGGINS: Yeah, Gerri Tatum, yeah. I don't know how you'd get in touch with her, but I know she's still here. I ran into somebody who knows her well. Now, I'll have to find out who that-- They keep in touch with her. I didn't know her that well when he married her. I got to meet her just the day before he died. You know, I didn't even know her before that.

ISOARDI: Did you ever have a chance to play duets with Tatum or anything like that, professionally or in the clubs? Did you guys ever play together?

WIGGINS: No way. [laughter] He didn't leave anything for you to play. [laughter] No. I was lucky I had a chance to play duets with Tommy Flanagan. That was nice. But, boy, I don't know anybody who could keep up with Tatum. Tatum wasn't really a good guy to jam with, because he was all over the piano all the time. It must have been his ego, although he wasn't an egotistical man. The way he played was all-out all the time. You know, you'd be trying to solo, and he's running all over the piano. So he wasn't too much of a guy to have in a jam session. He was the whole show. I don't care what you played, you couldn't match what he was doing, anyhow, you know?

ISOARDI: Did he ever play with a horn player?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. I've got lots of albums with him that he made with Benny Carter, Roy Eldridge. And it's the same thing, you know, it's all Tatum.

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ISOARDI: Okay. As you were saying, Gerry.

WIGGINS: Yeah, he was a solo pianist, see. That was his strength right there. Although I know, when he was younger, he accompanied Adelaide Hall. In fact, I think that's what really got him his big start. I've never heard any records of him accompanying her, but it must have been fantastic. And the trio, it was-- Well, there wasn't too much competition in the trio. The guys kept time for him, you know. But I always liked him best by himself, because there was nothing to inhibit him or stop him from going where-- You know, with a bass player, you don't want to go too far and lose him, so you can't stretch out that much. Although, I don't think he really cared. He was going where he was going anyhow. And his sense of time would drive a drummer crazy, because he knew where it was all the time. And if you would pat your foot and hum the tune, the melody, he was right there. But he'd go on some excursions sometimes where you'd wonder, "Where's he going? Is he still in the same tune?" It would be the same tune, but unless you had the melody in your mind and were singing it along, you wouldn't believe it. Because he could get farther out than the guys are today. Talk about flights of fancy, he'd take them, boy, and you'd say, "What did he do

there?" But he'd always find his way back.

ISOARDI: Do you know why Tatum moved out here?

WIGGINS: I hope for the same reason I did: the weather.

ISOARDI: Was he surviving mostly on club dates around the avenue? Do you know if he did any kind of other work?

WIGGINS: Oh, well, he used to play on Eighth Street. At one time, we were all working Eighth Street: Nat Cole, Art Tatum, myself, all the different clubs, you know.

ISOARDI: On Eighth Street?

WIGGINS: Eighth Street, yeah.

ISOARDI: What were some of the clubs there?

WIGGINS: The 31/33 Club, or 33/31--I forget how they had it--and I think the Tiffany was down there. There was-- Ask Fletcher all this. [laughter] He will know. Yeah. I'm trying to think of the name of the joint he played. Oh, boy. It seems so long ago now, and it could be just like yesterday. But that's when L.A. was jumping, boy. This was a good town then. A lot of good musicians, a lot of good clubs, and everybody was making a pretty fair buck, you know, for those times.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Well, it sounds amazing to think you'd just go from door to door. In a couple blocks, you could hit how many clubs at all hours.

WIGGINS: That's what I liked about New York. Here, it's-- If you see two different groups in one night, you're doing

good.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah. And even then, you've got to drive thirty miles from one club to another.

WIGGINS: Got to drive, yeah. The only things that are close together now are the Vine Street Bar and Grill, Catalina [Bar and Grill] and Linda's [restaurant] and that hotel on Hollywood Boulevard.

ISOARDI: Oh, the Roosevelt [Hotel]?

WIGGINS: Yeah, yeah. Those are the only close things. And I don't think there's enough going on at the same time at either one of them for you to warrant going.

ISOARDI: Yeah. And it's usually shut up by--what--one o'clock or so?

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, they usually close up pretty early.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Do you have any other remembrances of Tatum you'd like to share?

WIGGINS: Well, I know he was a fiend for baseball. He knew all the batting averages and everything else about baseball players. He could tell you what a guy hit in nineteen nothing, you know. "Yeah, I remember him, yeah. He was a lousy hitter. He batted .328," or something like that. He knew what they did. And he played a good game of pinochle, too. He was a pretty well-rounded man on all subjects. He wasn't just buried in music. In fact, when you sat down and talked to him, he very rarely would talk

about music. It was always baseball or some other sport.

ISOARDI: He was just about blind, wasn't he? How could he play pinochle? How could he play cards if--?

WIGGINS: Hold the cards up like this. [indicates]

ISOARDI: He put them right up against his one eye?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So out of one of his eyes, he could somewhat see, then?

WIGGINS: Oh, he could see. He'd make out the pit marks on the cards, and he was never wrong. [laughter] Yeah. Art could see good enough to see what he wanted to see! Like, I still don't believe Al Hibbler's blind! [laughter] Yeah, Hibbler's kind of amazing, too. Yeah. These guys have got a way about them, a sixth sense or something. But they make it.

ISOARDI: Let me throw some other names at you to see what memories you might make of them. What about Benny Carter down on the avenue then?

WIGGINS: Oh, well, I think we only played one job on the avenue. Most of the things I did with Benny were traveling.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. I was all over the country with Benny. And he had some great bands. Maybe we didn't make much money, but we sure had a lot of fun. Yeah, he had J.

J. Johnson, Max Roach at one time, Porter Kilbert, Gerald Wilson, Snooky Young, Bumps Myers-- He kept a good band. Like I said, it wasn't that much money, but, heck, I was young. I didn't need any money, anyhow. Yes. So he had some great bands. He's such a great arranger. Boy, Benny-- I wish people could hear some of the real stuff he's done, because he'd write for the band. We'd play it a couple of times, and he wouldn't play it anymore. But it was fantastic. He had an arrangement on "I Surrender, Dear," I never heard anything like it in my life. And it was the hardest-- Boy, the saxophone players went crazy trying to read it. When they finally got it together, it was a masterpiece. I think we played it once or twice, and that was it because he was always writing something.

ISOARDI: Did he ever record it?

WIGGINS: No, we didn't record that one. No, I wish we had. That would have been a classic today. I know he doesn't want to go through another rehearsal, because those guys were scuffling over that one. [laughter] And they were all good musicians, too, but he wrote hard. Boy, he could write hard.

ISOARDI: I think at one point--it may have been the early forties, I don't know--I think he integrated his band. I think he brought in Art Pepper.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah, that's--

ISOARDI: And I think he was one of the first on the West Coast to have a working band that way.

WIGGINS: Yeah. Oh, Benny has always been a liberal, though. All you had to do was be able to play.

ISOARDI: Did you ever encounter Art Pepper at all?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. I knew Art. Sure, I knew Art well. But, you know, we just went different ways. He was into his thing, and I wasn't into that thing, so-- You know.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah. Do you remember him down on the avenue at all when he was much younger?

WIGGINS: Vaguely, yeah. Yeah. A lot of guys came there. Jerry Leiber used to come down, the songwriter, you know. They [Leiber and Mike Stoller] were there. They must have been sixteen, seventeen years old at the time, and they were in the joints. But time goes fast when you're young, believe me. It just seems like a blur, you know. There's so much happening and so much to see, so much to do, you really don't concentrate on any one thing, you know. You see people you know, and then you may not see them again. So that's how that went.

ISOARDI: You've mentioned Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray. [laughter] I know it's painful to bring this up!

WIGGINS: No, I love them both! In fact, I didn't know anything about Wardell till Benny had sent for me. I was in San Francisco. He said, "Man, I've got a tenor

player." He had had this other guy who was really a great tenor player, too, but he tried to sound like Don Byas.

ISOARDI: Oh, Lucky Thompson?

WIGGINS: Lucky Thompson, yeah. And Benny said, "Yeah, well, I got a board for him." Anyhow, I ran into Wardell. That was the skinniest person I'd ever seen in my life. He looked like my finger. But, oh, he could fill that horn up. He could play. Yeah, he was a marvelous tenor player, and quiet, unassuming, you know. If you didn't know he played saxophone, you'd have wondered what he did to stay alive, because he was the skinniest man I've ever seen. But Benny had him, and he was something else. He and Dexter would get in those jam sessions, boy, and they would wear me out till [Charles] Mingus got tired. Like I told you, Mingus said, "Hey, Wig, enough! Let's go." So we left when they were playing. They didn't miss a beat. They didn't miss us at all. They kept on playing. No bass, no piano. They didn't care. The drummer was keeping time; that was good enough for them.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah. Any remembrances of either of those guys on the avenue or socializing with them or anything like that?

WIGGINS: Well, with Wardell, it was mostly with Benny's band, you know. We made quite a few records together for the Bihari brothers, I think their names were. They had

Crown Records. And we were in the studio all the time. He [Jules Bihari] was recording everybody--[Erroll] Garner, you name it. They just had a whole raft of records out. They were turning them out like an assembly line.

ISOARDI: Really? The Bihari brothers were that busy?

WIGGINS: Yeah. They had a good thing going. And Maxwell Davis was their chief arranger. He's good saxophone player and a good arranger, and he'd always get me on a session. There was a session two or three times every day. You know, it was really a money time here.

ISOARDI: Geez. What was it like recording for them? I mean, people have talked a lot about problems with royalties and musicians recording back then really not getting much for what they're doing. You get a flat fee for going and recording, and that's it. You never see another penny.

WIGGINS: That's it. Yeah. That's right.

ISOARDI: Is that pretty much your experience?

WIGGINS: Yeah. But everybody was doing it, you know.

ISOARDI: Even the majors were acting like that, as well?

WIGGINS: Well, we never got a chance to really play for the majors. At least I didn't until later years, except when I recorded with Kay Starr, you know. Well, that was-- But you don't expect any royalties, anyhow, if you're just backing a singer. The singer gets the royalties. You just

happen to be in the band. You get paid for the date. And there wasn't a tune of yours or something, you know.

That's why I love what they do in Europe. They've got a thing-- All right, say you're with a band, any band, and they record, say "Cotton Tail" or "C-Jam Blues"--that's an Ellington thing, as we know. If you play a solo on that, then you will get royalties from that solo, even though it's Ellington music. When they sell the record and you've got a solo on there, it's somebody else's music, but you had a solo, you get a royalty check every time they play that record.

ISOARDI: No kidding? So if it's a fifteen-minute piece, and you've got four soloists or whatever, each of you guys--?

WIGGINS: Yeah. Whoever's got a solo on it, they get a royalty. They don't do that over here, and they don't want that to ever happen over here, so, believe me, it's not going to happen. But that other union over there, whatever it is, they're pretty strong.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So who were some of the other--? I guess it was mostly the smaller independent labels that were recording most of--?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. I can't remember the labels, there were so many of them, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah, L.A. seems to have been just a capital of

small record companies.

WIGGINS: Yeah, it was a hotbed, yeah. A guy would have an office in his toilet, you know. I can't even remember half of them. I can't remember any of them, to tell you the truth.

ISOARDI: Did you ever deal directly with the Bihari brothers?

WIGGINS: Not me. No, Maxwell took care of all that. He always hired me for the sessions. I mean, I knew him, but, you know-- Not that they were inaccessible. You could talk to them, but I had nothing to say to them.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Do you have any idea what they were like as promoters or anything?

WIGGINS: Not really. I know they had a good thing going, and we made a lot of money with them, you know, such as it was.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So the session money was pretty good, then, for those recordings? For the band?

WIGGINS: Yeah, I guess. I don't remember exactly what it was, but it must have been all right, because I kept doing them. [laughter] I know you got paid more for three hours doing a date than you used to get all week at a club, so, you know, that made a difference. A guy could have one session a week and live comfortably. He might work in a club all week and he can't make the rent. So--

ISOARDI: Yeah. I remember, a little while ago, [Cecil] "Big Jay" McNeely talking about--

WIGGINS: He would know.

ISOARDI: Yeah. He was talking about some of the reasons why he started moving into more of an R and B [rhythm and blues] groove. He said he and Sonny Criss would play jazz like crazy down on the avenue--

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: They couldn't get any gigs, couldn't get any money.

WIGGINS: I don't remember Big Jay playing jazz. He was always always a honker when I heard him.

ISOARDI: Oh. Oh, well, gee, a couple of people--Buddy Collette and others--have said that, around 1946, they were still in high school, I think, and there was a band with, I think, Hampton Hawes on piano, and they had Sonny Criss and Jay McNeely in the front line.

WIGGINS: Sonny Criss was a good player.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. They said they were the hottest bebop band down on the avenue.

WIGGINS: Well, I was in the army. See, I don't know. From '44 to '46, I was out of circulation. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, the story was that those guys were the hottest, youngest band there, and they were playing bebop. And, as time went on, Jay went his way. He told me

that the jobs were so hard to find. They weren't paying anything.

WIGGINS: True.

ISOARDI: You know, it was tough to play jazz.

WIGGINS: Well, jazz has always gotten the short end of the stick, no matter how much they try to get it up there. It just reaches a very small segment of the population.

ISOARDI: Yeah. It's one of the art forms that's going to be rewarded-- You're going to be rewarded historically, but not-- [laughter]

WIGGINS: Yeah. So you just have to learn how to do a lot of different things to survive.

ISOARDI: Yeah. You mentioned Jackie Kelso.

WIGGINS: Oh, he was a wonderful saxophone player.

ISOARDI: Jackie's somebody whom you met early on, then, when you came out here?

WIGGINS: I met him with Chico [Hamilton] and Buddy when I first came out here.

ISOARDI: How did you run into these guys? Was it kind of as a group? Or--?

WIGGINS: We just sort of gravitated towards one another, you know. I guess I was playing what they wanted to hear and they were playing what I wanted to hear.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

WIGGINS: You know, you usually find your own level with

music, you know, and you know right away the guys you don't want to be associated with, you know. It's not being snobbish. It's just that some guys, you hear them play, and you know they ain't going to go any further and don't want to go any further. So you don't want to get stuck with that. You want somebody who's playing well already and improving, too, at the same time. Buddy and Chico and Jackie and Mingus, these guys, they wanted to play. And they were for real about playing. They didn't want to just sit on the job because it was a job. They wanted to try new things, write things and all that. At that time, nobody was very good at it, but they were all trying. And you had some guys who'd been on a job ten, fifteen years--these were the old-timers we were talking about--and all they'd want to do is sit there and play the same tunes every night and draw that check and go home. I wanted to sit there and play and have fun and go out and hang out all morning, get home at daylight or whenever I got there. You know, that's when I would meet the guys. We were players.

ISOARDI: So you would jam pretty regularly with these guys?

WIGGINS: Oh, every second. I did the same thing in New York, because, you know-- And New York was different, because guys in New York would rehearse with no job in

sight. They'd just get together and rehearse and get something together. Out here, if you didn't have a job coming, the guys didn't even think about rehearsal. They're still that way. You know, if you say, "Let's have a rehearsal. [They say] "Where's the job? What's it paying?" That's the first question. Even with the rehearsal bands, you get a band together for a rehearsal, and you call rehearsal at, say, ten o'clock, and you get there, and half the guys there are substitutes that the guy you hired sent in. They say, "Well, somebody had a studio job" or "so-and-so and so-and-so." And there's not too many guys out here, so the same big bands would tend to have the same personnel all the time, you know, whether it was the [Nat Pierce-Frank Capp] Juggernaut or whoever. The same guys playing in it. The only thing that's different is the music. And as for the youngsters, they're out of luck. There's really no place for them to really learn.

ISOARDI: Yeah, that's what I mentioned earlier, the fact that there just aren't those clubs that you could go to. Where do young people go now when they want to play?

WIGGINS: To where the old guys want to go when they want to play. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, that's one of the things that strikes me so much as I find out about Central is just what a place to learn your craft and to play and meet people.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: And now, I mean, young kids must go to school and become music majors, and that's about it.

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, that's great in one way. But they haven't got a course in school yet that will teach what the pitfalls are out here. Guys have no idea. You've got to get out in that street and bump heads with the rest of the people. That's where you learn about it, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I also think that that affects the music. It's got to affect the music, too. My guess is, if you take the same players and you put them in a scene like Central, and then you take the same kind of players and you put them in someplace like Berklee [School of Music], they're going to come out very different.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: It's going to be a different kind of music.

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Very different.

WIGGINS: But that makes music.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

WIGGINS: You know, some guys come out of those schools and do very well, and some guys come out and they're at a loss for where to get started. And it's sad, in a way, because there are so many youngsters who really want to play, you know. But my advice for all of them is to get a good

classical background, whether they intend to play classics or not.

ISOARDI: Why?

WIGGINS: Because that's where it all begins.

ISOARDI: The technique, you mean?

WIGGINS: Oh, not so much technique as just a knowledge of music. You know, they laugh about the the symphonies and all that, but there's a wealth of music in there that you can use playing jazz. But if you've never experienced it, never played it, or never even listened to it, you lose all that. That's why I'm glad I went the High School of Music and Arts. We didn't do any jazz there, really. Everything was symphony music, you know. And that really improved me as far as my musical knowledge. I've learned quite a bit since then, too, but that was the foundation. I don't think going into straight jazz-- You may become great doing that, but you can't do anything else. You know, a lot of guys don't even bother to learn how to read. All they can do is play the instrument. Okay, that's fine, as far as that goes. But if a studio job comes up, or a recording date, unless they hire him just to play a solo, they're out of it. But the whole music business is so shaky now, you never know. Everything is rock and rap and-- You know. It's not a very good time for it.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I know some of the guys you mentioned,

guys that you found simpatico when you came here--people like Buddy and Jackie and Chico--studied with some people who they say were really crucial in shaping them, good teachers, some with classical backgrounds. They mentioned Lloyd Reese--

WIGGINS: Oh, Lloyd. Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: And they talked about Merle Johnston, I think, who was important in teaching people, I think, like Frank Morgan and [Eric] Dolphy, as well as Buddy Collette. Did you ever encounter any of these L.A. teachers?

WIGGINS: Yeah, I met Lloyd Reese. I knew Lloyd very well, because all the piano players used to hang out at his house. He had a big house with a piano in damn near every room. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Really?

WIGGINS: Yeah, big grand pianos.

ISOARDI: And that was the guy's home, as well?

WIGGINS: Yeah, his home. Yeah.

ISOARDI: Where was that at? Do you know?

WIGGINS: I don't know. It was so many years ago. And that was-- Well, everybody hung out there, but mostly piano players. We'd get there. You'd find Hampton Hawes there or Lorenzo Flennoy. That was the place to go, you know, if we weren't over at Lovejoy's, which was an after-hours joint. We went there on account of Tatum would go over

there all the time and play. But Lloyd was instrumental in helping a lot of musicians.

ISOARDI: But he, himself, was a--

WIGGINS: He was a trumpet player. He was a hell of a trumpet player, yeah. He was really before my time. I got here when he was much older, you know, his last days. But he still took an interest in young musicians.

ISOARDI: And he must have emphasized piano tremendously.

WIGGINS: I don't know whether he had a music school there or what. I don't know what Lloyd did. In fact, I don't think I really cared, you know. You know, it was a place to be where all the guys were. And he was a nice guy. Oh, he'd lecture us, not the father kind of lecturing, but he'd kind of steer you away from things you shouldn't be doing, like that. He was a good influence on the younger guys. Plus, he knew his music. He was no slouch. He had to be good, because he was playing first chair when he was playing, so that says something in itself.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I should tell you this story. I'd never heard it before until-- I think it was Buddy Collette who mentioned it--about Lloyd Reese. Because I had thought he was a trumpeter, primarily, and Buddy told me that he was an alto player.

WIGGINS: This I didn't know.

ISOARDI: He was playing in Les Hite's band. I guess this

must have been in the thirties.

WIGGINS: Was he? Oh, my god!

ISOARDI: Can you believe it? In the 1930s. He was playing first or second alto. And he heard something on trumpet and he asked some guys something about it and they said, "Aw, no, no. You don't know anything about it. Forget it. Forget it." Well, apparently you don't do that to Lloyd Reese. He went and spent a year learning trumpet. He came back, and, out of the blue, he asked if he could play trumpet. They couldn't believe it. He apparently then sat down and just blew the hell out of that instrument. [laughter] And those guys, they couldn't believe it!

WIGGINS: Yeah. Yeah.

ISOARDI: So he just turned himself into a trumpet player. Amazing.

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, I never knew he had even touched a saxophone. Like I say, I got out here late, you know. Buddy and all the guys knew him from their school days and everything. When I met him, he was retired then.

ISOARDI: There was another teacher that a lot of people talk about. Maybe you didn't come across him as much, a guy named Sam Browne.

WIGGINS: Oh, I met Sam Browne for the first time about a year ago. They had some kind of function, and he was

there. This was the guy that Buddy and all of them talk about. He seemed to be a big force in their lives. I never even knew him to--

ISOARDI: You'd hear about Sam Browne, then, quite a bit.

WIGGINS: Yeah. Yeah. I don't know him well enough to say hello to him, you know. That's the only time I remember seeing him.

ISOARDI: Let me throw some more names at you: Charlie Mingus.

WIGGINS: Oh, that was my man. Charlie and I got along-- You know, we were two nuts together, crazy, and really didn't care. I think Joe Comfort made Charlie a good bass player, because we had a job-- I think it was Chico and-- I don't know if Buddy was on that or not. Anyhow, four or five of us had this gig. So they wanted a bass player, and they were auditioning Charlie and Joe Comfort. Well, Joe was up on his instrument; he read and could play. And Charlie couldn't read or do anything. You know, he just wanted to play. So they took Joe Comfort. And Charlie said, "I'm going to make you sorry you ever picked up a bass." [laughter] You know, he said, "I'll make all of you sorry." And he went off on that.

ISOARDI: That must have been, when? When was that?

WIGGINS: Oh, we were all in our teens then, I guess. That's when I'd first gotten out here, I think. And

Charlie did it. He got on that bass. He was doing things that nobody believed was possible. Yeah. And he made them sorry. Of all the bass players out here, you never heard about them like you heard about Charlie Mingus. You know, Joe Comfort's got a measure of success from being with the Nat [King] Cole Trio and working with Nelson Riddle and [Frank] Sinatra, but the rest of the guys [you] never heard of them. There was Art Farmer's brother, he was a good bass player, but you never heard about him--Addison Farmer. And, well, Leroy Vinnegar, he made his mark. But of all the bass players, Charlie is the one who really got all the ink, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah, no kidding. He was such a fine composer, too.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. But he was still a nut. [laughter]

ISOARDI: In what way was he a nut?

WIGGINS: Oh, he was short-tempered, you know. At the drop of a hat, he was ready to fight. They tell me the story that he was on the big red car and some sailor made one of those off remarks and he cleaned out a whole train full of sailors by himself. He was very race conscious, and they said the wrong word. He went off on them.

ISOARDI: Oh, I'd never heard that story.

WIGGINS: Well, there are some things we don't talk about that much, you know.

ISOARDI: It's a good story about Mingus.

WIGGINS: Yeah. He would fight at the drop of a hat, and mostly all the time he won. He was a heavyweight. He was no little guy.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

WIGGINS: The last time I saw him, I couldn't believe it. He was in a wheelchair, and he was so overweight. And he had this Arab getup on, you know, the little cap with the thing around it [keffiyeh]. I forget what they call it. We talked for a little bit. He was on his way out then, too, though. But that was my rhythm section. Boy, if there was a session, we'd be there.

ISOARDI: You guys played a lot together, then.

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, you know, just around town, yeah.

ISOARDI: Regular gigs? Or just jamming? Or both?

WIGGINS: Whatever came up.

ISOARDI: Whatever was there. Who'd you guys usually have as a drummer?

WIGGINS: I'm trying to think. I guess we used Bill Douglass most the time. I don't think Earl [Palmer] had gotten here yet. Lee Young was active then.

ISOARDI: He would play with you guys? Lee Young?

WIGGINS: Yeah. In fact, Lee Young was in my trio. I used him down at the Turban Room for a while.

ISOARDI: Did you really? With who on bass? With Mingus

or [Red] Callender?

WIGGINS: Oh, no. It was probably Joe Comfort. But Red played with me, too. Red and-- No, this is after Mingus, though.

ISOARDI: Well, the Turban Room. Was that in the Dunbar Hotel?

WIGGINS: It was next door to the Dunbar.

ISOARDI: What was that like? Was it a fancy place?

WIGGINS: No, it was about from that window to here, about that wide, and straight back. You got a bar and a wall--

ISOARDI: So about eight feet by about twenty feet? Something like that?

WIGGINS: The length from about that wall to this wall, I guess?

ISOARDI: Okay. About thirty feet.

WIGGINS: Yeah. And about this far out here was a bar. You walked down here, and we were at the end of the bar here on little stands up higher than the bar. That was it. But that was the place. Oh, boy, we kept it jumping.

ISOARDI: How long did your gig last there?

WIGGINS: I don't know. Seemed like I was there forever.

ISOARDI: Good gig, then. Steady.

WIGGINS: Yeah, you know. It was just one of the hot spots on the avenue. All up and down the avenue, things were happening, so-- You know.

ISOARDI: Was there sort of like a pecking order of clubs? You know, some not so hot, some okay, some bad? Or did people just drift in and out of all of them?

WIGGINS: They drifted in and out, yeah.

ISOARDI: That was pretty much it? There wasn't a real kind of hierarchy, then, of clubs or anything like that?

WIGGINS: No. Everybody got an equal shot. They'd have good nights, they'd have bad nights. I always had good nights, because I was feeling good all the time. [laughter] I had no problem. Yeah, shucks.

ISOARDI: Did you ever encounter Eric Dolphy or Frank Morgan? They must have been youngsters back then.

WIGGINS: Oh, I knew Frank. I knew his father [Stanley Morgan], too. His father just passed not too long ago. I just read about it in the past week or two weeks. Yeah. Stanley died. He went to Hawaii where he had an Ink Spots group. He stuck with that crap all those years. But it's okay. He made a good living at it, I guess. In fact, he sent for me one time, and I said, "No, I don't think I want to bury myself in Hawaii." I'd been there a couple of times, and it didn't do a thing for me. It has no music to talk about except the island music, you know, and they were doing their Ink Spots things, which, you know, I really couldn't stand that [sings fifties-style doo-wop chord progression] all night long. They don't pay enough money

to do that. [laughter]

ISOARDI: I guess you must have heard Frank as a youngster then.

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: He must have been in his mid-teens or so. How did he strike you then?

WIGGINS: Oh, he was a good player.

ISOARDI: That good?

WIGGINS: Well, he was learning, you know, just like everybody else was learning.

ISOARDI: Because a lot of people--things I've read about him and things--talk about him being such a prodigy, you know, when he was fourteen or fifteen, just playing the hell out of his horn. Did he strike you that way?

WIGGINS: No, not really.

ISOARDI: No? I mean, you could tell there was some talent, but he still had some work to do?

WIGGINS: Well, he was just another-- You know, I had a thing about saxophone players. [laughter] I wasn't crazy about any of them. You know, he was no Benny Carter or Ben Webster or nothing like that. He's probably playing better now than he ever played in his life.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. He's done some great stuff.

WIGGINS: No, as I remember Frank, he wasn't setting the world on fire, but, then, I wasn't around him that much. I

was older than Frank, anyhow, you know, so I was Mr. Wiggins to him. [laughter]

ISOARDI: What about Eric Dolphy? Did you ever come across him or have a chance to play with him around?

WIGGINS: Well, yeah. Eric was not one of my favorites. I mean, he was a nice guy and a friend, but he wasn't one of my favorite saxophone players.

ISOARDI: Different sound? Or--?

WIGGINS: Well, he was out there in that stratosphere where I didn't understand it. I still don't understand it.

ISOARDI: Even back then?

WIGGINS: Back then, yeah.

ISOARDI: Back then he was doing something different?

WIGGINS: Yeah, he was different, all right. And the guys who are doing something different nowadays, I don't understand them either. Don't get me started talking, because I'll step on a lot of toes, and I'd rather not do that. But I guess I'd have to be a lot younger again to appreciate what they're doing nowadays, because some of it, to me, is just a lot of noise. You know, it has no direction. I just have to start listening more and find out what the heck they're doing. Somebody must hear it, because a lot of the guys are doing great. I just haven't gotten into it yet. But I guess it's like when we started playing bop. Nobody understood that, but bop was music,

you know.

ISOARDI: [Louis] Armstrong called it Chinese or something like that?

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, "Pops," you know-- Yeah, I worked quite a while with him, too.

ISOARDI: Did you really?

WIGGINS: Yeah, I worked with Louis. In fact, I joined Benny Carter after I'd left Louis. I had a ball with that band, because I was about-- What? I don't know if I was even twenty years old then. And all the guys were old in that band. They were thirty and thirty-five. You know, they were real old fellows! [laughter]

ISOARDI: Geez! Now I feel old! [laughter]

WIGGINS: Well, that's what I'm saying! You know, anybody thirty or over thirty, that was an old man. But I made a lot of friends in that band. Joe Garland took me under his wing. And I joined that band with the drummer-- Country. Oh, what was his name? Jessie Price. Jessie Price and I joined Louis together. We joined him in Washington, D.C. That was something else. Pops was great, though. He was a great man. They talked about him, but he was for real. And he could play his can off, too. Whew! I say it now, that old man. He wasn't that much older, but, you know, to me he was-- Yeah. He could hit some notes on the trumpet I couldn't believe you could do. When he felt like playing,

he could play. But he had his thing going, you know, and they talked about him. Well, the younger guys, you know, they didn't understand where he was coming from. [tape recorder off] Yeah, Louis was a sweetheart.

ISOARDI: You must have been this young bopper from New York. Did you ever talk about bop with him or anything like that?

WIGGINS: He was still the boss, you know. I was kind of in awe of him. I hung out with Benny, but that was a different thing. You know, playing with Louis Armstrong, well, that was like a feather in my cap. When my mother found out I was playing with Louis, she couldn't believe it. She thought it was the greatest thing on earth, and I thought it was just another job, because I quit him two weeks out of New York.

ISOARDI: Any other individuals, musicians, characters from the avenue that stick out in your mind? People that you respected or--?

WIGGINS: No, you know, just the guys we've been talking about.

ISOARDI: We haven't left anybody out?

WIGGINS: I probably have.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Well, what about Hampton Hawes?

WIGGINS: Well, you see, piano players don't get to see that much of each other.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right.

WIGGINS: We never worked together. I might see him in a jam session, but an everyday thing, he's on his job, I'm on my job.

ISOARDI: That's right. That's right. How about Chico Hamilton? Did you play with him?

WIGGINS: Loved Chico. Chico's something else. He got me the gig with Lena Horne. Chico's always been an aggressive guy. A hell of drummer when he was around here. He used to put the pots on. You'd say, "Let's go, Chico," and he'd swing you into bad health. He really could take care of business. We're still friends. [laughter] I don't see him as often as I used to, but when I get to New York I always call him. If he has time, I've got time, we get together for lunch or-- You know.

ISOARDI: Is he living in New York now?

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, he's been in New York for years now. Yeah, he got on out of here. It's so funny. He couldn't wait to get to New York; I couldn't wait to get out here. But he's more geared to that pace, you know. After I left New York and got out here, I didn't want to go back to that rat race again. And that's what it is.

ISOARDI: It's tough. I lived there for three years, and it's a trade-off all the time. It's exciting, but, on the other hand, it really takes a toll.

WIGGINS: Oh, man. It will age you in just a little time if you keep up that pace. And it's not fun town like it used to be, either, you know. It's a very dangerous town now. But so are most places in America, so that doesn't say too much. But I'd rather be here than there. That's all I can say. [laughter]

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FEBRUARY 13, 1990

ISOARDI: Okay, Gerry, I guess last session, when we got together, I had sort of a list of different things to ask you, and we covered a lot of individual people and things like that. Maybe we can begin tonight by you sort of taking up the narrative with the time you moved here for good, which I think you said was--what--the late forties sometime? When you pretty much settled in here?

WIGGINS: Yeah, I guess so. Yeah.

ISOARDI: Maybe you could take up the story from there and go up to the early fifties or so?

WIGGINS: Oh, man.

ISOARDI: Or, if you'd rather, I can just throw some things at you. Want to do that?

WIGGINS: That would be better, because I'm still foggy. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, okay. Gee, that's a clue to ask you a question. I was talking to Bill [William] Douglass, and he was sort of describing some of your days and your nights and nights and days down there, and--

WIGGINS: How could he remember? [laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, yeah. He said it was foggy for him, too. He said you guys really got around. [laughter] And at one point he started talking about your entourage. He said,

"Oh, I had an entourage, but it was nothing compared to Gerry's." [laughter]

WIGGINS: Oh. [laughter] That dirty dog. [laughter] Oh, god.

ISOARDI: So you guys had a big following down there?

WIGGINS: Yeah, quite a big following. Yeah. The veil lifts. [laughter] Oh, goodness.

ISOARDI: Let's see. I was asking you specifically about a number of particular musicians and individuals, people like Dexter [Gordon] and Benny Carter and Art Tatum, etc., but can you think of some people who maybe I haven't mentioned? Just unique individuals that stick out in your mind for that period--whether they were musicians or not--whom we haven't talked about that you think should be remembered. Or characters who were just hanging out down there, owners, or anything like that. Are there any individuals who stand out in your mind from--?

WIGGINS: Well, there were a lot of characters. There was a baritone player by the name of Frank Mapps, Jr.

ISOARDI: Frank Mabbs?

WIGGINS: Mapps.

ISOARDI: Mapps, as in--?

WIGGINS: He had a sidekick, and I can't think of his name. What was his name? I think he played trumpet, but I can't recall his name. They were--now, you say characters--

pretty good musicians. They never did anything or went anywhere, but they were always around.

ISOARDI: Always playing on the avenue [Central Avenue]?

WIGGINS: Not playing, hanging around. [laughter] I don't think either one of them could get a job.

ISOARDI: Why do you remember these guys?

WIGGINS: Well, like I said, they were always around and had some good musical ideas, but they never did anything with them, you know. They would say, "Try this or try that," and it would be pretty good, but nothing ever came of it. It's kind of hard to describe. And they were, you know, at that time, my kind of people. They were pretty heavy drinkers, too, I guess, so we were kindred souls, you know. [laughter] I'm trying to think. Well, they're really not important, because nobody probably knows them but me. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, yeah. But this helps fill out the picture of who was down there, who was on the avenue at night. And these guys were there.

WIGGINS: Well, you know, all of the-- [Cecil] "Big Jay" McNeely, and--

ISOARDI: Well, yeah. But these guys were the ones that nobody would hear about now, right?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: But they were there.

WIGGINS: Yeah, but, I mean, they were just hangers-on, more or less, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So they were in the clubs all the time just listening?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: Trying to play. Or did they even try?

WIGGINS: No, they didn't try to play. I think they'd given up on it. Oh, there was one guy, too. His name was Hawk. That's what we used to call him, Hawk. Now, he's from the Chico Hamilton era. He'd been around here quite a while. Good tenor player, but something went haywire with him. Hawk Nelson, that's what his name was. Yeah, you'd better put that down, because I'm sure a lot of people knew him.

ISOARDI: Hawk. Why was he called Hawk? It wasn't after Coleman Hawkins, was it?

WIGGINS: No, no. He used to refer to himself as "the Hawk," you know. If you ever run into Chico or Jackie Kelso or one of those guys, ask them about Hawk Nelson.

ISOARDI: Did he play an instrument?

WIGGINS: He was a good tenor player, as I remember, yeah. God, I haven't thought of him in years.

ISOARDI: Are there any stories you remember about him or anything particular about him?

WIGGINS: There must be. I can't think of them offhand,

but-- Well, Chico and Jackie and them knew him better than I did.

ISOARDI: Did he play with you guys?

WIGGINS: He sat in a couple of times, if I remember correctly, yeah. See, I usually had a trio, and I really didn't want any horns around.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I know. You know, you're giving me a complex! [laughter]

WIGGINS: Well, no--

ISOARDI: Every time I pick up my saxophone now, I think of you. And Bill Douglass tells me the same thing. [laughter] He said, "Horn players! Who needs them?"

WIGGINS: Well, you see, in those days, horn players were so long-winded. They thought that the rhythm section was there for their benefit. And they could play all night long, as long as they wanted, and all we'd do was keep time and play the changes for them. So we got to hate them pretty much. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, I know. You and Bill say it over and over again!

WIGGINS: But you had to be a rhythm section man to realize how frustrating this was.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I'll bet.

WIGGINS: A guy would come on your job and say, "Can I sit in?" You're going to be nice, you say, "Yeah," and you

don't get a chance to play for the rest of the night. He's playing every note of every song. After he's worn himself out, he'll turn to you and say, "Okay, you've got it." About the time you get set on one chorus, then he's back in to get on the next chorus. You know, it's-- You learn to hate horn players, believe me.

ISOARDI: Now I do. [laughter]

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: I believe you. Let me mention another name to you. Do you remember a guy named Dynamite Jackson?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. The prizefighter. Sure. He had a joint on-- Was it Adams [Boulevard] and Crenshaw [Boulevard], or--?

ISOARDI: It was a club. [Dynamite Jackson's]

WIGGINS: Club, yeah. It was a joint. [laughter] They all were joints. Yeah, booze and music.

ISOARDI: That was pretty much it, eh? No food?

WIGGINS: I think they might have had some food. I don't remember eating there. Yeah, that was Ernie Freeman's place, really. He was more or less the house guy there, you know.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see.

WIGGINS: And at that time he was playing organ, and doing a good job of it, too.

ISOARDI: What was Dynamite Jackson like? The guy was--

what--a former heavyweight champ? In California? Something like that?

WIGGINS: Yeah, California. He was a nice guy. You know, I never had a problem with him. He paid on time, and he wasn't a taskmaster. You know, you came to do your job, and that was it. But he was a nice man. Yeah.

ISOARDI: Did you ever have any direct dealings with any of the other clubowners down there on the avenue?

WIGGINS: Well, I knew them all, you know, but it was not a buddy-buddy type thing. They knew who I was, I knew who they were.

ISOARDI: Nothing sticks out in your mind about any of them in particular?

WIGGINS: Yeah, but I'm not about to tell you that. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh! [laughter] Why not? Why not?

WIGGINS: No, no.

ISOARDI: You know, we'll put it under lock and key for a hundred years, and then the truth will come out.

WIGGINS: No. Never mind, no. No way.

ISOARDI: Then your great grandkids will really--

WIGGINS: Too many people are still alive. [laughter] No, I'll pass on that one. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: No recollections of any-- I mean, things that you would want to share on any of these people?

WIGGINS: Well, since they didn't happen to me directly, you know-- It's only hearsay, so I'd rather not be the bearer of ill tidings.

ISOARDI: No good tidings?

WIGGINS: I thought it was funny, at the time, you know, but the guys didn't think it was funny.

ISOARDI: Maybe you could fill in some names for us. I know Curtis Mosby was a big clubowner. [laughter] What's so funny? Oh, yeah?

WIGGINS: Yeah. [laughter] Okay, now--

ISOARDI: See, now, he's not around.

WIGGINS: I know he's not around. I'm trying to think. His brother just died, too, Esvan [Mosby].

ISOARDI: Yeah, just--

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: I think he was in that film with Ernie Andrews [Ernie Andrews: Blues for Central Avenue], and I think he died shortly after that.

WIGGINS: Yeah. [laughter] Those are the two I had in mind. It's so funny! [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, really? [laughter] Well, you know, they're about the only names that we know of clubowners down there. I guess Mosby was so prominent you come across his name everywhere.

WIGGINS: I'm trying to think, now. Yeah. Let's see.

Well, the place I worked at was owned by a lawyer, a very prominent lawyer, Harry Weiss.

ISOARDI: Is that the Turban Room?

WIGGINS: He owned the Turban Room, yeah. He's a big wheel in town still. And he had a partner, Glen-- What was Glen's last name? I think it was Glen McMann, but I wouldn't swear to it. I worked there for years.

ISOARDI: And they were the owners the whole time you were working there?

WIGGINS: Yeah. Oh, Harry was a very high-powered lawyer, then and now.

ISOARDI: What type of law did he practice?

WIGGINS: Criminal law. He kept a lot of guys walking the streets who should have been away. In fact, I see him every now and then. He's a pretty old man now, though.

ISOARDI: Do you know why he went into the club business?

WIGGINS: Oh, no.

ISOARDI: I mean, it seems like here's a criminal lawyer. Presumably, in that kind of profession, he's very busy with his--

WIGGINS: Well, I think at that time, he was young enough, you know--

ISOARDI: To handle it all?

WIGGINS: Yeah. He's probably maybe ten, fifteen years older than I am, you know.

ISOARDI: So back then he would have been in his thirties or something?

WIGGINS: Right, in his thirties, yeah. It was probably an investment. In fact, he owned quite a few clubs. I think he owned a place called the Jade Room, but I'm not certain about that. Yeah, I'm sure it was called the Jade Room. He owned that, also.

ISOARDI: Was he an owner who was visible? Was he at the clubs a lot, listening to the music?

WIGGINS: Oh, he'd hang out, yeah.

ISOARDI: Really? The guy had a lot of energy.

WIGGINS: Not an every-night type of thing, but you'd see him fairly often. I think he let Glen do most of the supervising of the club.

ISOARDI: What was his--? Was he a lawyer also? Or was he mostly managing the club?

WIGGINS: No. Let's just say he was Harry's friend. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Okay. Gee, I should have brought a bottle! Interesting.

WIGGINS: Yeah, I know I used to play parties at their house. They had a fabulous pad. Whew, boy! I can't remember where it was now, but it was fantastic. Yeah.

ISOARDI: When you were in L.A.--let me ask you just briefly--was [Curtis] Mosby the owner of the [Club] Alabam

back then?

WIGGINS: Yeah, he was the owner. He was when I first came out here. That's before I stayed. But he had the Alabam then.

ISOARDI: Did he have any other clubs, do you know? Or was it just the Alabam, primarily?

WIGGINS: I think only the Alabam.

ISOARDI: Just the Alabam?

WIGGINS: As far as I can remember, yeah.

ISOARDI: Was his brother Esvan also a clubowner? Or did he just sort of work for his brother?

WIGGINS: I think he was kind of around his brother. I don't think he owned anything.

ISOARDI: I see. I see.

WIGGINS: I'm not too clear about what Esvan did. Curtis was the main man.

ISOARDI: What about places like Lovejoy's or the Downbeat [Club], etc. Do you know who--?

WIGGINS: Oh, Lovejoy's was great. It was upstairs, and they had this big, raggedy piano, and that's where we'd all go because [Art] Tatum always used to come in and play like he did in New York. He used to go to a place called Ruben's and play after-hours. So out here it was Lovejoys.

ISOARDI: Tatum would play on this raggedy old piano and--

WIGGINS: And make it sound like a Steinway. Nobody else

could do anything with it but him. I don't know how he accomplished that. It looked like the piano says, "I'll sound good for him," and every note he played was a gem. Another piano player would step up there, touch it, with all the busted keys and everything else-- I don't know how he got by it. He had a habit of-- Before he sat down, he'd run his hands the length of the piano, and [if there were] any clams, he would never touch them while he was playing. I don't know how he did that, but he did.

ISOARDI: Amazing. Amazing control. Do you know who owned Lovejoy's or who ran it?

WIGGINS: I think his name was Curtis Lovejoy, I think.

ISOARDI: Do you know what his story was? Was he a musician or just a--?

WIGGINS: No, no, he was--

ISOARDI: A guy who owned the club.

WIGGINS: Yeah. He owned the club, yeah. You've got to remember, in those days, I really wasn't concerned about who owned what. There was Lovejoy's place, and there was the Crestwell's place, which was on Western [Avenue], and there was-- That's how everybody referred to it, you know. Nobody really cared about ownership. All they wanted to know was who's paying off, and that was good enough. Whoever gave you the check.

ISOARDI: Well, I think, in a way, that's sort of one of

the parts of the Central Avenue scene that we're trying to get at: the economy of it and who owned it and ran it. Because it's something that you really can't find anywhere. It's something people never really talked about. Obviously, you just wanted to get paid, etc. So whatever you can remember about that is great.

WIGGINS: If you want to know who owned what and did what, you can call Mayor [Thomas] Bradley and talk to him. He could give you the whole scoop on everything.

ISOARDI: Well, he was a cop on the beat down there, right? Or was he much more involved than that?

WIGGINS: Well, I think he was a lieutenant then.

ISOARDI: That high?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And that was sort of his territory, I guess? Was that it?

WIGGINS: Yeah, it probably was. Yeah, I know he was around. The cops that you should have talked to, they're all dead now. There was-- Oh, what's his name? Oh, Gabby [Galbraith]. Gabby was the sweetest cop who ever lived. All he lived for was jazz. He loved jazz. He loved Tatum. He loved piano players.

ISOARDI: That was the perfect beat for him, then.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. Well, he'd have us all over to his house and he'd tape Tatum and tape me and Carl Perkins and

everybody. He just lived for his-- He had no business being a policeman, believe me. [laughter]

ISOARDI: How were relations between the musicians and the cops down there in general?

WIGGINS: Great!

ISOARDI: No problems ever?

WIGGINS: No. You know, well, musicians didn't cause any problems. It was other people. [laughter] Yeah, I had one cop, Todd Roark. Todd used to look after me and Sabu. We were too young to be down there, anyhow, you know. He'd say, "Hey, watch yourselves, now." Todd was a good friend. He's dead, too, now.

ISOARDI: So, on the whole--I mean, from your experience, not just vis-à-vis musicians, but just the presence of the police on the avenue--it was pretty low-key, then?

WIGGINS: Well, we knew them all. There were the good little brothers, and-- God, how many of them? You know, they understood us, we understood them. We weren't into crime or anything.

ISOARDI: Never any problems or tense situations or anything like that?

WIGGINS: Oh, no. Nothing like that.

ISOARDI: No harassment on the part of cops or anything like that?

WIGGINS: No.

ISOARDI: They didn't care too much about the after-hours or how late the clubs ran or--?

WIGGINS: Well, it wasn't legal, but it was overlooked, you know. I've never known any of the clubs to be closed up. Three o'clock in the morning, and places would be jumping. And all the clubs were open. They had after-hours spots where you could buy whiskey and stuff. Those were illegal, but they never got bothered too much, I don't think. There were too many of them to really shut them down. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, I'm really getting that impression, and not just at Central Avenue. Actually, that leads to another point, and that's what the scene was like outside of Central. Because, certainly, people were working almost throughout Southern California, right? I guess there were all sorts of places you could go to work. What was your experience? Did you work--? What areas outside of Central Avenue did you work and what were they like?

WIGGINS: I stayed on Central Avenue all the time till things moved over to Western.

ISOARDI: Did you really? You didn't play many clubs in Hollywood or anything like that?

WIGGINS: No.

ISOARDI: The Capri or the Trouville or any places like that?

WIGGINS: No, I never did. Maybe some of the other guys did. Nat [King Cole] might have played there.

ISOARDI: Did you ever go out west at all, toward Long Beach or down to San Diego or any places like that?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah, the Stroller's. I forgot all about that. Yeah.

ISOARDI: Oh, that rings a bell. That was in--

WIGGINS: I think the Stroller's was in Long Beach, yeah. I think a guy by the name of-- Was it Harry Rubin who owned it? Make a note to ask Bill Douglass about that, because he'd remember the owner. I think it's Harry Rubin that was the Stroller's, or he had a brother named Harry, whatever it was. Yeah, I remember working the Stroller's, and that's a long time ago, too. It was a pretty good gig, though. It was mostly jam sessions all the time. Actually, Long Beach was off my beat. That was just too far to travel. It still is. [laughter]

ISOARDI: The way the freeways are, no kidding. Did you ever go up in the [San Fernando] Valley at all? Glendale or any of the areas up there? Pasadena? Club dates?

WIGGINS: No, not really.

ISOARDI: Not at all?

WIGGINS: I think I worked one little town. I can't think of the name of that. It wasn't too much really jazz out that way, anyhow.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you about the unions. I think you joined--what--[American Federation of Musicians, Local] 767 when you came to L.A.?

WIGGINS: Un-huh.

ISOARDI: Do you have any remembrances of 767? Who some of the people were in it? How it functioned? I mean, I remember you telling me a bit about Elmer Fain and how he-- Oh, did you know that he just died?

WIGGINS: Elmer?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

WIGGINS: Yeah, I know he passed. Yeah.

ISOARDI: Yeah, just recently.

WIGGINS: And there was a lady there that was big in the union, Florence Cadrez.

ISOARDI: What was she?

WIGGINS: Oh, more or less secretary, I guess. Florence, and there was Baron Moorehead. He was, I guess, the best-liked guy at the union. No, Paul Howard was the guy that-- You know, he's also gone. He was the guy that everybody liked a lot. "Mr. Paul," we always called him. And there was Baron Moorehead, and you know about Fain.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Was it Leo Davis who was the president of 767?

WIGGINS: Leo Davis was the president, yeah.

ISOARDI: What was he like as a president?

WIGGINS: He's still around. Yeah, I saw Leo-- [to Lynn Wiggins] Honey, last time we were down to the union for that thing?

LYNN WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

WIGGINS: Yeah, Leo was there.

LYNN WIGGINS: Right. I was surprised.

WIGGINS: Yeah. That's when Buddy [Collette] had the big band. Yeah. Leo's still around.

ISOARDI: What kind of a president was he? Do you have any remembrances of how he ran the union?

WIGGINS: Oh, he was a well-liked guy, you know.

ISOARDI: A very popular guy?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Was he an Elmer Fain type of a--?

WIGGINS: Oh, no, no, no. Completely different.

ISOARDI: A very different kind of guy?

WIGGINS: Uh-huh. Fain was a good guy. He just was a businessman. If you give him a job to do, he's going do the job. At that time, I couldn't understand that. [laughter] I was pretty loose, so why shouldn't everybody else be loose? [laughter] Yeah, but Fain was a letter-of-the-law guy. If it said in the book, "Do this," that's the way it was. There were no in-between areas, you know. Everything was black and white. No gray areas or "I'll let you off" or so-and-so. If you were doing something you

weren't supposed to do, you were guilty and he tried you on the spot, you know. [laughter] No jury.

ISOARDI: Instant justice.

WIGGINS: Yeah. But I found out later he wasn't a bad guy at all.

ISOARDI: Do you have any remembrances of the amalgamation period and then going into Local 47 and all that?

WIGGINS: Well, I was here when it was all going on, you know, but I still had to make a living. I really didn't understand what all the hullabaloo was about. I know they wanted to put the two unions together. And [there was] the usual opposition; some of the guys wanted it, and some guys didn't want it, and they couldn't see the benefit of it.

ISOARDI: Do you remember any of the arguments that they raised against it, the guys who were opposed to it?

WIGGINS: Not really. I think they felt that what they considered their territory would be swallowed up. But that never happened. You know, actually, more jobs were expanded for them. At that time, they couldn't see it.

ISOARDI: Was there a generational kind of divide with the older musicians wanting to keep 767 and the younger musicians more or less favoring the amalgamation? Was it anything that clear-cut?

WIGGINS: It might have been that way. Have you talked to Jimmy Clark yet?

ISOARDI: No. Who's Jimmy Clark?

WIGGINS: Jimmy Clark was a business agent. Let me give you--

ISOARDI: I'm pretty sure I don't have his name down.

WIGGINS: He was a bass player, but then he got into the union bit, and he stuck with that.

ISOARDI: And he was a business agent in 767? And then 47, also?

WIGGINS: And 47, also, yeah. He can tell you more stories than I could possibly tell you. Anything he says about me, don't you believe. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Why not? Could he be a hundred percent wrong?

WIGGINS: In my book, yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, this sounds like somebody we've really got to talk to!

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. He's a good friend. He is a very good friend. Yeah. Jimmy was very good to me. And it was pretty hard, the way I was. [laughter] I know I tested him many a time.

ISOARDI: Really? So he was a bit older that you were, and he sort of took you under his wing or something like this? Or looked out for you?

WIGGINS: Oh, no, no. No, no. He just-- He didn't take me under his-- Nobody could really take me under their wing. [laughter] That was impossible. But Jimmy would advise me

when it looked like I was doing something wrong unionwise, you know. He'd say, "I wouldn't do that." I probably went on and did it, anyhow, and he had to bail me out. Did you say you talked to Lee Young?

ISOARDI: Well, we've talked to him, and he's agreed to be interviewed, and we're trying to get the meeting set up now.

WIGGINS: He knows. Yeah. The main three guys, like I said, are Fletcher Smith, Lee Young, and Jimmy Clark.

ISOARDI: They're the three that you would recommend more than anyone else?

WIGGINS: Oh, and Jake Porter. Have you talked to him yet?

ISOARDI: No, I haven't.

WIGGINS: Well, I know you've got him on the [interviewee] list, haven't you?

ISOARDI: I'm sure. I've got him on the list.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah, sure.

ISOARDI: I'll make another note of it. We talked a little bit about the recording industry, I think, last time.

WIGGINS: Well, so much was going on, you know. And then they had the record band and--

ISOARDI: I know none of the majors were down there recording people on Central. I guess it was pretty much a lot of independents, labels that were run by people like the Bihari brothers, I guess.

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: --that were recording jazz. Do you remember any other labels outside of theirs? They had like Crown [Records]?

WIGGINS: I'm trying to think of this one guy. I can't think of his name. [John Dolphin] He did a lot of recording, too. Dolphin's of Hollywood. That's what it was. Dolphin's of Hollywood. Now, I never did anything for him, because he hired all the blues guys, you know.

ISOARDI: Oh, it was mostly a blues label, then?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Like who? Who was singing the blues down on Central? I guess T-Bone Walker was around, right?

WIGGINS: Well, T-Bone was around. Oh, what's this cat's name? I thought I'd never forget him. I can't think of his name. Fletcher will fill you in. When you say T-Bone, Fletcher will call-- Oh, Wynonie Harris. Bad news. [laughter] Whew! Yeah, Wynonie. Now, that was a character, if you wanted a character.

ISOARDI: Why?

WIGGINS: Well, I'd better not even talk about him. He's impossible.

ISOARDI: Well, I know he got into fights a lot down at the Plantation [Club].

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. He got into fights everywhere he

went. And Witherspoon was around then, too, Jimmy Witherspoon. And, naturally, Ernie Andrews. Let's see. Who else can I think of? And there was a guy, Cee Pee Johnson.

ISOARDI: Oh, he had a band, didn't he?

WIGGINS: Yeah, he had a band. And he did a lot of movie work.

ISOARDI: In what capacity? Musically?

WIGGINS: Yeah, with a band. Yeah.

ISOARDI: For what kind of studios? I know there was a big black motion picture industry then.

WIGGINS: Oh, no. This was for the major studios.

ISOARDI: Do you remember which studios they were recorded for?

WIGGINS: Oh, probably MGM [Metro-Goldwyn Mayer] or one of those, you know.

ISOARDI: Did you ever play in his band?

WIGGINS: No.

ISOARDI: Do you remember what happened to him? Was he going strong during the whole period you were down there, as much as you remember?

WIGGINS: Yeah. In fact, the last picture I saw him in, he was trying to jump around on those tom-toms, and it looked like he wasn't going to make it, he'd gotten so old. [laughter] It was funny. Not funny, but, you know, he

shouldn't have been doing it. If you've got to make a buck, you make a buck.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

WIGGINS: Yeah. Let's see. These names won't come to me like they should. Oh, there was another guy, C. L. Burke.

ISOARDI: Oh, I don't know that name.

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, he had a big band, because I played with him, and I'm trying to think where I worked with him. He had most of the guys out of Les Hite's band, or they left him to go with Les Hite. Yeah, C. L. Burke.

ISOARDI: Were these all people, more or less, that Dolphin's recorded? That they went after?

WIGGINS: Well, I don't know if-- Dolphin's recorded mostly singers and singing groups, I think. You know, we used to call them bird acts.

ISOARDI: Bird acts?

WIGGINS: Yeah, like the Orioles and the Flamingos and-- [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, right. Yeah, there was a whole series of-- The Robins, I think? Wasn't there the Robins?

WIGGINS: The Robins, yeah.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I guess about the time you were spending a lot of time on Central, R and B [rhythm and blues] was coming in, in a big way.

WIGGINS: Yes, it was. Whew!

ISOARDI: Do you remember when you first heard it?

WIGGINS: I remember that I wouldn't play it, so they starved me to death. I said, "I'm not going to play that junk." I went into a session and the guy told me, "Wig, I want you to play a bad chord," you know. And I'm trying to think of what can I lay on him and everything. And I'm stretching out. He says, "No. Play like you've got gloves on, like you don't know anything about the piano." That's the day I gave up that rock and roll and blues stuff. I said, "Hey, forget it," and they didn't hire me anymore. They said, "He's not progressive. He doesn't want to play what's coming in." The guys over there had these sessions, you know, like twenty-four hours a day. And guys, for what money they were making, were doing pretty well.

ISOARDI: What kind of sessions were these? Twenty-four hours?

WIGGINS: Record dates. They were just recording this junk, as far as I was concerned. But since I had taken a stand and I wasn't going to back off, they didn't hire me. They said, "He won't play what we want him to play, so forget him." And they did.

ISOARDI: So it really came in big, then, on the avenue? There were a lot of small record companies.

WIGGINS: They were recording this stuff, you can't believe how much. It was so bad, as far as I was concerned. It

was mostly blues all the time. Any way you could think of it, it was blues, with the guitars wanging away and the tenor honking and the drums had a heavy backbeat. You know, it wasn't music at all. But it took the public's fancy, and they ate it up.

ISOARDI: Yeah, no kidding. It really took off.

WIGGINS: It took off. In fact, guys like myself were saying, "Well, this won't last." It got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. All we could do was sit there and look at it and listen to it. But it was horrible. It really was.

ISOARDI: I know in the case of Big Jay, he changed from being a bopper to playing R and B. Do you know of any other musicians who made that kind of transition? Who were able to pull that off? Who were able to do it?

WIGGINS: Well, there was a guy-- Oh, boy. Jack McVea.

ISOARDI: He was playing rhythm and blues then?

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, more or less. He was doing the things like "Open the Door, Richard" and all that. In fact, that was a big hit record for him.

ISOARDI: That's right.

WIGGINS: And Joe Liggins. They had their things going.

ISOARDI: Liggins had been primarily a jazz musician before? And then he sort of switched over to--?

WIGGINS: I think he was more of a blues piano-- No, but he

did a lot of-- I guess you wouldn't call it pop, but blues-ballad type things.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. Did you notice, I guess, as this was coming in, that clubs started changing their policy? That they were looking for R and B players then?

WIGGINS: Yeah, because that was the hot thing.

ISOARDI: So you found more and more clubs were going that way and fewer clubs wanted jazz musicians? It was that kind of thing coming in?

WIGGINS: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Do you remember some of those clubs that had done that? That had changed over?

WIGGINS: Well, actually, I got out of town. I started traveling. Between the army time and then the time with different singers, I wasn't in town that much to really--

ISOARDI: Well, do you remember a couple of clubs, say, that you know were playing R and B then, or featuring R and B acts back then?

WIGGINS: Oh, you've got to talk to the older heads about that, because I really can't say with any authority.

ISOARDI: Yeah, okay. [laughter] Okay. All right.

WIGGINS: Bill [William] Green ought to be able to tell you quite a bit.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. He's going to talk to us soon. Yeah.

WIGGINS: Because Bill wouldn't have any of that junk. He

was playing good music and always has, always will, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Great teacher. Boy.

WIGGINS: Oh, he should be.

ISOARDI: As well as a fine musician.

WIGGINS: Well, he's conscientious about it, and that's hard to find nowadays.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. Very serious. Very serious.

WIGGINS: Yeah, it's important to him that whatever he shows you, you do it well. And he's going to make damn sure that you do do it well, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah. And teaching, you know, it's another craft. It's something you've got to work at.

WIGGINS: I don't even want to get into it.

ISOARDI: Yeah. And he's so good at it.

WIGGINS: There are guys that will string you along, but then there are guys that really make a business of teaching. You have to be serious about it. Like everybody says, "Well, why don't you give piano lessons?" I don't give piano lessons because I've got to figure out a system to teach them. I've got to stay with them till they know as much as I know, at least. That will take the rest of my life. There are a lot of other things I'd like to do, rather than that. Especially the mothers coming with their little kids. "Johnny wants to take piano lessons," you

know.

ISOARDI: Well, all you've got to do is tell them it's $100 an hour. [laughter]

WIGGINS: Oh, that won't phase some of them. You'd be surprised. You know, if they've got it in their mind, they'll pay the tariff. But then, they also want to sit there and tell you what you're doing wrong. [laughter] So it's not worth it for $500 an hour, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Did you have any other thoughts on this sudden R and B influx down there?

WIGGINS: No, it was just-- I guess it was like when bop came to Harlem, you know. Diz [Dizzy Gillespie] started it, and everybody started listening to it. It was different, and it was musical, so everybody went along with it. Some guys didn't, but most of the guys were trying to figure out what it was.

ISOARDI: Oh, gee. I just thought of a name. Hadda Brooks, piano player.

WIGGINS: She's still around.

ISOARDI: She was active on Central back then?

WIGGINS: Yeah, she probably played on Central. She did quite a few records.

ISOARDI: Was she mostly an R and B kind of piano player? Do you remember ever hearing her?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. I heard her not too long ago. She's

still active.

ISOARDI: She was at the Central Avenue thing in May, I guess, that you were--

WIGGINS: Yeah. But she also has been working down on Wilshire Boulevard, at a club down there. She's been working there. She's mostly a singer/piano player, you know. That was her thing.

Naturally, you've got Nellie Lutcher.

ISOARDI: She played rhythm and blues piano, that kind of piano?

WIGGINS: She was an entertainer. She had her own thing going. In rhythm and blues, I think, Maxwell Davis. He was the fair-haired boy with the Bihari brothers. He did all the arranging for them and putting the groups together.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? So he was like their A and R [artists and repertory] man?

WIGGINS: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Do you remember any other prominent record labels that were down there recording people a lot, aside from the Biharis and Dolphin's?

WIGGINS: No, but I wasn't into it that much, you know, the recording bit. I did quite a few things, but it wasn't in the rhythm and blues vein. I was doing a lot of things for Gene Norman and-- Let's see. Who else? Plus, I had my studio work, so I really didn't-- If I worked at night,

okay. If I didn't work at night, it was still okay.

ISOARDI: Yeah. You started doing a lot of studio work, then, almost by the time you settled here? Or--?

WIGGINS: Oh, it came and went, you know. Mostly when Jackie Mills got me with Jack Cole. Every time Marilyn [Monroe] did something, I was called for it, and that usually lasted for months and months and months. It was always a long, drawn-out affair with her.

ISOARDI: Now, I know back then, Buddy Collette, I guess, gained some notoriety.

WIGGINS: Oh, Buddy was doing the shows. He did a lot of TV shows, radio shows, or what have you.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Wasn't he the first black musician to be featured on TV, I think, with the Groucho [Marx "You Bet Your Life"] band?

WIGGINS: Yeah. I guess so, yeah.

ISOARDI: Something like that. And he had kind of an association, I guess, with Jerry Fielding, who was responsible for getting him to--

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. Well, we all worked with Jerry.

ISOARDI: You worked with Jerry Fielding, then, also.

WIGGINS: Sure.

ISOARDI: It wasn't on the Groucho show, was it?

WIGGINS: No, no. He had a big band, a rehearsal band, and we used to record and things like that.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? Studio?

WIGGINS: Club dates and things. Yeah.

ISOARDI: Were you in any of those TV bands or TV shows that he was involved with?

WIGGINS: I think I might have made one or two. I don't remember. I was one of the last guys to get with the band. I think Red Callender played with Jerry, I know, and, naturally, Buddy. Have you talked to Red yet?

ISOARDI: Red Callender?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: No, I haven't talked to him.

WIGGINS: Well, you'd better get ahold of him and talk to him, too.

ISOARDI: Yeah, he's certainly on our list.

WIGGINS: See, they'll clean up all the loose ends for me.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, but, you know, there isn't just one story.

WIGGINS: Oh, no.

ISOARDI: Everyone's got a little bit different slant, so everybody brings something new to it.

WIGGINS: Yeah, but, you see, mine is a hazy slant. [laughter]

ISOARDI: But, see, that's telling us something about what it was like to be a musician on Central Avenue. [laughter]

WIGGINS: Oh, no, but everybody wasn't like me. You can't

judge them by me. [laughter]

ISOARDI: No, but it's another piece of a complex puzzle. We get Bill Douglass telling us about you and Buddy and you telling us about them, and it all pulls together.

WIGGINS: Well, I hope that it works out, then.

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ISOARDI: We were talking about the recording labels and Jerry Fielding, etc. So you didn't have a great deal of contact with Jerry Fielding, then? Or didn't work in any of those early shows?

WIGGINS: No, just occasionally. In fact, I only played once with Jerry Fielding on a local TV show, if I remember correctly. I'm trying to think of who had the band on the Nat Cole show, though. Who had that band? [Nelson Riddle] I don't remember that, even.

ISOARDI: Okay. I guess to conclude, Gerry, let me just ask you a couple of very general things. I mean, there are things that probably everyone has a lot of different parts of an answer to. Do you have any thoughts on why Central Avenue declined? I guess, by the mid-fifties or so, it really doesn't exist anymore.

WIGGINS: Everything went west. Everything came west.

ISOARDI: What do you mean?

WIGGINS: Oh, well, all the guys started working on the Westside, and possibly the amalgamation had something to do with it. I don't know.

ISOARDI: You think so?

WIGGINS: That's a thought, anyhow.

ISOARDI: How would it have affected the club scene on

Central?

WIGGINS: Well, the territory opened up, and the guys, you know-- When I first came out here, I don't think Negroes could go past Central Avenue. I think there was only one colored family living on what they called the Westside then. At least that's what they used to tell me. When I first came here, I never got off of Central Avenue that I can remember. I was always there. But I think that it-- Well, Central Avenue just went down.

ISOARDI: So it was a combination of people simply living in other areas where they couldn't before?

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And amalgamation affecting it in the sense that musicians then simply started looking for work outside of Central?

WIGGINS: Yeah. I think so, yeah. This is my theory. I could be wrong, and I probably am wrong. But Central Avenue now is a wasteland. I used to go down to visit an old friend of mine [Luke Jones] who was a barber and also a saxophone player, and I think it got too rough for him down there. He just closed up his shop. Have you been down there?

ISOARDI: Just driven through. And it's--

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, that's close enough.

ISOARDI: Yeah, well-- Yeah.

WIGGINS: Once is enough, you know. It's pretty grim.

ISOARDI: Yeah, it's just rubble-filled lots and run-down buildings.

WIGGINS: Yeah. But it will build up again. It will do just like they do in Harlem. You know, Harlem was pretty bad. Now people are saying, "The heck with this good property up there. We're going to go back and build it up again." And that's what they're doing. So it will be a resurgence, I'm sure. I probably won't see it, and I really don't care. Everything goes in cycles.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Let me ask you another question. Now, granted, you sort of hit the scene, on a regular basis, a bit late, but, in a way, your position, having spent a lot of time in New York, is unique and gives you a different perspective. How would you sort of assess or how would you tell someone how important Central Avenue was, say, in American musical history? I mean, what did it contribute?

WIGGINS: Oh, I would say it was very important for the fact that not only the musicians but all the movie people came down there all the time. All the stars would go to Central Avenue. That was their hangout, you know. You could see the biggest stars come down there.

ISOARDI: Why do you think it attracted so many movie stars? Did any of them ever tell you why they hung out

down there a lot?

WIGGINS: No. Someplace to go, I guess. It was pretty wide open, you know, and you could hear good music. And they had to come down there, because we couldn't go over there! [laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, was Central really the only place you could go where they had so many after-hours joints?

WIGGINS: Well, not only that, that's where all the famous musicians at that time would gravitate. When a guy came in town, he went to Central Avenue, because that's where the action was.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Do you know if there were other places in L.A., outside of the Central Avenue area, say Hollywood, that had after-hours policies or anything like that? Do you know of any clubs that--?

WIGGINS: I wouldn't have known.

ISOARDI: As far as you know, there weren't any?

WIGGINS: No. Now, there must have been some, but there always are.

ISOARDI: But as far as you knew, the musicians from throughout L.A., for after-hours, they headed to Central.

WIGGINS: Yeah. Yeah.

ISOARDI: What about musically? How important was Central Avenue, say, in American jazz history? What would you say Central Avenue contributed to jazz?

WIGGINS: Oh, I think the rock and roll must have started here. No, a lot of good musicians came off of Central Avenue. I mean very good guys. It should have a place in history. You know, like Bourbon Street and Beale Street and Fifty-second Street, Central Avenue's right up there with them as far as being important, I think.

ISOARDI: Not so much, say, for a style, but for the people who came through it?

WIGGINS: They had a style, believe it or not. All musicians are influenced by each other. I don't care where you come from. You'll find a guy in Milwaukee playing like a guy on Central Avenue, or a guy in Seattle playing like a guy in New York. Because it's kind of a shared thing among musicians. If not shared, stolen, because anytime I hear somebody play something, I see if I can find out what it is. That's how musicians progress, by listening to each other. So Central Avenue is important. It really is. A lot of good things came off the avenue.

Well, the same can be said for Seattle. At one time it had quite a jazz thing going, during the war years. But nothing like Central Avenue. Central Avenue was probably the closest thing to Fifty-second Street.

ISOARDI: Than anywhere else in the country?

WIGGINS: Than anywhere else that I know of. Maybe New Orleans, but that was strictly Dixieland-type stuff.

ISOARDI: An earlier period.

WIGGINS: Yeah. But I think for jazz you'd have to rate Central Avenue right along with Fifty-second Street.

ISOARDI: In terms of modern jazz, anyway.

WIGGINS: Yeah.

ISOARDI: As sort of shaping modern jazz, in a sense.

WIGGINS: Yeah. It's funny. I don't think anybody ever thought of that before, but it's true.

ISOARDI: Well, I think it's only recently that people have been going around saying, "Hey, wait a minute. We really had something down there."

WIGGINS: Yeah. Oh, no, listen, Central Avenue was great, especially for me. I had enjoyed every moment of it, even in my befuddled condition. [laughter] You know, guys from out of town would come in and we'd listen to them and they'd listen to us. It's funny, I'm talking like I'm a Los Angeles person. Although I'm from New York, I've been here so long, I feel like I am part of it. Some wonderful things happened down there.

ISOARDI: Do you think it changed you much musically, compared to the way you were when you left New York?

WIGGINS: Oh, no. I was set already when I left New York. Unfortunately, I'd heard Art Tatum, and I thought that was the only way piano should be played. So nobody influenced me after that. I got to the point where I

finally shook that thing about Art, you know, trying to play everything he played. Of course, if you've got any sense-- Some people do it sooner. They realize that's not the way to go, because you just can't do it. And even if you do master it, then what are you doing? You're copying somebody else. You don't have a thing of yourself, you know. So I don't think I've changed. But I took lessons from a teacher that Benny Carter sent me to, [Lyle] "Spud" Murphy. That had a great influence on my playing and the way I put things together.

ISOARDI: How? In what way?

WIGGINS: Well, Spud has a system--it was actually for writing music--called the equal interval system, and it's radically different from anything you've ever heard. It's so good that most of the guys you've talked to have been to Spud, like Buddy Collette. I think Bill Green's been to him. They all took part in the course.

ISOARDI: Was this in L.A.? Was this an L.A. teacher?

WIGGINS: Yeah. You don't know who Spud Murphy is?

ISOARDI: I've heard the name, but I don't--

WIGGINS: His name is Lyle Murphy, Lyle Spud Murphy. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: You were saying you studied with Lyle Spud Murphy.

WIGGINS: Lyle Spud Murphy.

ISOARDI: Who was a piano teacher in this area.

WIGGINS: No, no, no. No, he was an arranger, a studio arranger. I think clarinet was his instrument. But he was a very good orchestrator and arranger. In the earlier years, like when I was a youngster, he was famous for doing what we call stock arrangements. That was a complete arrangement for bands. That was for strings, brass, reeds, and the whole thing. I didn't meet Spud until I came out here with Benny Carter. I had asked Benny if he would help me learn how to arrange. He told me he didn't have enough time but he would send me to somebody who could. He recommended Spud Murphy. I was out of the army. I went to see Spud, and he said yeah. I took advantage of the G.I. Bill and studied with him for four years.

ISOARDI: So this was '46, '47?

WIGGINS: No, this was like-- It was '48, I guess. It would have to be '48, sure, because that's when I was living with Benny. I went to Spud for four years under the G.I. Bill, and he changed my whole musical concept. The things he did I never heard anybody do. But he wasn't a piano teacher. He was teaching me strictly arranging and orchestration and his system, which at that time he called a twelve-tone system. Everybody confused it with [Arnold] Schoenberg's twelve-tone row, so he changed it to the equal interval system, which it's known by now. It's a

revolution. It's a new approach to music that's just fantastic.

ISOARDI: How would you categorize the approach? How would you, in a few words, or whatever, explain what the approach is about? What makes it so different from what you've known before? What does it give you as a musician?

WIGGINS: It breaks all the rules and gives you a different set of rules that you can break yourself. It depends on what the situation is. The old way of teaching, if you were making a movement, you had to hold one note down and move the other two to go from one chord to another so you have a common tone. With Spud, it's automatic. You didn't even have to study that. The way you played his system, everything just came out right for you. You didn't have to worry about voices and all that, because, what he taught you, the voicing was natural. Whether it's for one person or two hundred people, it would all come out right. Everybody would go where they're supposed to go without you beating your brains out or playing it over to make sure it sounded right. It was just revolutionary. I studied with Spud for four years, and every time I get some extra money and a little time I go back for another lesson.

ISOARDI: He's still teaching today?

WIGGINS: And I'm going back again, yeah. All the guys have gone to him: Buddy Collette and a lot of guys I

didn't even know knew of Spud Murphy. You know, some of the guys who all of a sudden got quite good around here, I couldn't figure out why.

ISOARDI: And that was the reason?

WIGGINS: Yeah. He is a modern-day genius, believe me.

ISOARDI: Does he teach privately out of his home?

WIGGINS: Yeah. You have the whole course there, but the course is no good without him.

ISOARDI: These two thick volumes are his course?

WIGGINS: Yeah. Well, that's the-- That represents about two hundred of these lesson books. I know, because I did two hundred of these. I filled up two hundred books like this. That's for the lessons and everything.

ISOARDI: That's a pretty intense four years!

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: So when you first started with him in '48, was he pretty generally known on the avenue among musicians as being this kind of a genius? Or was it just a handful of you guys?

WIGGINS: No, no. Yeah, I was one of the first two or three students.

ISOARDI: Of his?

WIGGINS: Of his. In fact, he didn't even know how to teach. He was putting it together then. He'd always been a good arranger, but so was Van Alexander and all the rest

of them. But he just came up with a new wrinkle on it, and it's paid off for me and countless other people. Some of the guys that really applied themselves, they're holding down jobs in studios and all that, making fabulous money. Guys you'll probably never hear of, but they get the work done.

ISOARDI: You know, one of the things that strikes me-- You mentioned Spud Murphy now, and I really hadn't known this about him. But there were so many amazing teachers down here then. I mean, this is yet another one of them. There were people like--

WIGGINS: Well, they were instrumental teachers. They would teach trumpet or piano. Spud made up a system for me, because I was a piano player. He made little exercises for me to play so I could become familiar with which way the system was going. But it applies to any instrument. All you have to do is sit down there and work at it. And it's another case I wish I'd have worked harder, just like, when my mother had me taking lessons, I wish I'd have studied harder then, not knowing I would be into music this deeply. But maybe it worked out for the best. I have no regrets.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Has his influence spread quite a bit, do you think?

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: He's widely known now?

WIGGINS: Well, I don't know how widely known. I know the guys in L.A., his students, we swear by him. He's got about, I'd say, fifty students now. Every year we give him a birthday party, and you'd be surprised at the guys who attend. You know, he's like our mentor. He knows it all. And the beautiful part about this is he'll never finish the system. It just goes on and on and on and on.

ISOARDI: He's still adding to it? Developing it?

WIGGINS: Yeah! He says he couldn't do it in his lifetime or ten lifetimes. There's so much more. It's not complicated the way he explains it, but talking to somebody who didn't know, just a musician who's not exposed to this, he would believe it's black magic or something, you know, because we never thought that way. It's amazing.

ISOARDI: Well, this is another contribution from Central Avenue days.

WIGGINS: Yeah, well, when Benny Carter sent me to Spud, he did the greatest thing for me on earth. I'll always be thankful to him for that, because I'd have been just like the other guys, trying to hear what I could hear with no purpose, you know. Playing what I heard and trying to copy. You can take this system, give ten guys one tune, and say, "Okay, work on it," and not one of them will sound alike. They'll all have a different approach, and it will

all be good. You can't do anything bad with the system. You may write something that's far out, but it will be listenable. No clashing or atonal stuff. It will all make sense to you. Or you can give it to a hundred guys, and still you won't get the same thing.

ISOARDI: Well, I'm really intrigued. [laughter] I'm really intrigued.

WIGGINS: Because everybody's got their own way of hearing something, and there are so many ways you can go. You know, he's got scales you never heard of. He made up his own scales. Some of them are scales that you recognize. Our basic scales are here [referring to book]. Like, if it's in C, that would be-- You know.

ISOARDI: Right. Right.

WIGGINS: And then there are some scales over here which I added somewhere. Oh, here they are. Other different scales. Like I say, it's truly amazing. So you don't even have to worry about the keys, because you know what "one" is in every key. You know, if it's in C, or it's in E-flat, or it's in E-natural, or A, you just follow the chart. You will come up with things that will scare you to death, because you say, "How did I think of that?" You didn't. The system gave it to you. It's truly amazing.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Well, Gerry, I think we're just about at the end. Do you have any final thoughts? Anything at all

on Central Avenue and that period?

WIGGINS: I'm glad I was part of it. It's a very important part of my life. Not only me, a lot of other guys, too. It was educational in quite a few ways, in fact, better than Fifty-second Street, I think, because you got a chance to participate mostly in Central Avenue, whereas Fifty-second Street, it was always the name groups.

ISOARDI: Interesting. No one's made that comparison yet.

WIGGINS: Well, you know, if Art Tatum was playing at the Three Deuces or somewhere in Chicago, or wherever in New York, you couldn't go up there and sit in with him. But on Central Avenue, if he was playing, you could jump on in there and nobody would say anything.

ISOARDI: Maybe that's one of the reasons they had so many fine players coming out of Central Avenue. So many more people had a chance to play.

WIGGINS: Oh, yeah. They had a chance to play and learn. Yeah. There were a lot of good musicians in this town who never got anywhere, but they were still good musicians. They went into some other things. A couple of guys I know went into electronics. Everybody has their own calling, I guess. Myself, this is all I ever wanted to do. As the song says, "As the curtain falls, just think, 'I get paid for this.'" You know? [laughter] That pretty much sums it up for me.

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